

**MEDEA COLLOQUIUM (European Institute for Research on Mediterranean
and Euro-Arab Cooperation)**

**THE ROLE OF THE WORLDWIDE WEB AND SATELLITE TV IN THE
RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE PEOPLES OF THE OSCE, THE
MEDITERRANEAN AND THE MIDDLE EASTERN COUNTRIES**

BRUSSELS, 29 May 2006

**Opening address by Karel De Gucht, Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs
and Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE**

Your Excellency Minister Dr Ayad Ben Amin Madani, Minister of Culture and
Information of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Distinguished guests,

I have the pleasure of welcoming you to the MEDEA colloquium on 'The role
of the worldwide web and satellite TV in the relationships between the
peoples of the OSCE, the Mediterranean and the Middle Eastern countries'.

When the chairman of MEDEA, Minister Francois-Xavier de Donnée, first contacted me with a proposal for this event, we very quickly agreed on the importance of this topic in the context of the Belgian OSCE Chairmanship. At that point, neither of us realized that the publication of a series of cartoons in a Danish newspaper and the subsequent reactions would make the subject even more topical.

Neither did we know that we would have the pleasure of working together on other crucial OSCE themes. As you may be aware, I have asked François-Xavier de Donnée to act as one of my personal envoys on the functioning of electoral observation mechanisms, together with former Norwegian Minister of foreign affairs Jan Petersen. I take this opportunity to thank him for that important work, as I thank him – and through him his colleagues at MEDEA – for the hard work that has gone into organizing this colloquium.

In my capacity as Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE, I am likewise delighted to welcome representatives of several OSCE institutions. The OSCE's representative for press freedom, Mr Miklos Haraszti, will be participating in your work today as a panellist. The fact that this fundamental freedom – the

freedom of the press – should have, as it were, its ‘own’ institution within the OSCE is testament to the great importance that the participating States attach to it. In addition, press freedom is among the priorities of the Belgian Chairmanship for the human dimension this year. In July, there will be a meeting in Vienna about access to information and the protection of journalists, in particular the protection of confidentiality when it comes to journalists’ sources.

A lot of work has been done in recent years at the OSCE to encourage the promotion of tolerance and mutual respect. At the end of 2004, three personal envoys of the Chairmanship were appointed, to tackle anti-Semitism; discrimination against Muslims; and other forms of intolerance, xenophobia and racism, including discrimination against Christians.

In addition, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, ODIHR, has embarked on an ambitious programme for tolerance. It was in this context that a round table was held a few weeks ago in Warsaw, attended by Muslim non-governmental organizations.

After several high-level conferences over recent years – Vienna in 2003, Paris and Brussels in 2004, Cordoba in 2005 – the OSCE foreign ministers decided that this year the focus should be on the implementation of commitments.

The promotion of respect and tolerance is also at the top of the agenda for Belgium's OSCE Chairmanship. For example, on 27 January last, here at the palais d'Egmont, a commemorative ceremony was held for the victims of the Holocaust. During that ceremony, the ODIHR presented guidelines for educators on Holocaust remembrance

The question of education to promote tolerance and respect will also be at the centre of an OSCE conference to be held later this year in Dubrovnik in Croatia. Before then, a meeting of the non-governmental organizations on the theme of tolerance will be held in Almaty in Kazakhstan on 11 June, and the conference on inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue will be held there on 12 and 13 June. Finally, the collection of data on hate crime is an issue which will be explored in September in Vienna.

The cartoon issue has certainly raised the profile of the OSCE commitments on media freedom and tolerance. In my reaction as OSCE Chairman, I stressed the point that freedom of expression and media freedom are fundamental freedoms which serve as the cornerstones for a democratic society. I likewise emphasized that the exercise of these freedoms brings with it duties and responsibilities, and that the press bears a responsibility vis-à-vis society.

In any case, it is not the place of governments to dictate what the press can and cannot report. If a difference of opinion occurs, it is for the courts to decide. And under no circumstances is the use of force justified as a reaction to an attitude by the press that is perceived as insulting.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen

The OSCE's strategy after the cartoons affair focuses primarily on a positive approach, on the promotion of tolerance and respect. This positive approach, in my view, is also an essential element on the agenda for today. Even though the new forms of communication can unarguably be abused to

foment hate and extremism, the fact still remains that the dissemination of a positive message is and must be possible.

Anyway, as the messages of hatred on the radio during the genocide in Rwanda showed, the danger of abuse is not restricted to the internet or satellite TV. There is naturally a difference of scale: the internet and satellite TV are vectors of our globalized world, and they contribute to a worldwide network of opinions.

What matters is not just the prevention of abuses – and press freedom in that context is an asset rather than an obstacle – but also, and most importantly, how the media can play a positive role. For we must not forget that the internet and satellite TV contribute to the democratization process and freedom of opinion in countries where the national press is subject to heavy restrictions. Promoting tolerance and respect is part of this. Without wishing to pre-empt your activities today, might I suggest a few areas for consideration:

- increasing mutual information and thereby mutual understanding
- the presentation of a fuller, more constructive and subtle picture of the people of the OSCE, the Mediterranean and the Middle East

- a contribution towards education and an understanding of the need for more tolerance
- and finally, the spread of fundamental freedoms and democratic values.

I am confident that this colloquium will lead to the identification of such a positive agenda, which is one of the reasons why the Belgian OSCE Chairmanship has lent its explicit support to this meeting. Another reason for our support is to confirm the great importance of dialogue with the Mediterranean countries and the Middle East. The dialogue with the Mediterranean partners is an important facet of the external relations of the OSCE, which – in the context of this colloquium by MEDEA – is being opened up to the whole region. I welcome Mr Bruce George, President Emeritus of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and Special Representative on the Mediterranean of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

Dialogue at the regional level is useful and important, but of course is not sufficient on its own. The initiative by the UN – the Alliance of Civilizations – put in motion by Spain and Turkey, and later endorsed by the Secretary-General – ensures that this dialogue is also taking place at the global level.

Belgium is the second-largest donor to this UN programme, a powerful illustration of the importance attached by our country to this initiative. The OSCE is working on its own contribution to the Alliance of Civilizations, which the OSCE Secretary-General and I will present to Kofi Annan at the end of June.

With your consent, I intend to notify the Co-Chairs of the Alliance of Civilizations at the United Nations about the results of our debate today, as a contribution to the reflection on the essential role played by the global media in the consolidation of trust between different cultures and religions.

The idea is to agree on a single, uniform 'responsible modernity'. I refer to 'modernity' because our contemporary civilization now relies on an irreversible, universal 'acquis' in the form of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This 'acquis' cannot be questioned, but it does need also to be 'responsible', namely founded upon the fundamental principle of respect for the diversity of cultures and religions. The world is a global village in which religions and cultures have to coexist in harmony, in a non-violent way, on the basis of common principles of equality and justice. You here today, as professional in the field of the internet and of

satellite TV, need to contribute to this subtle balance. This is a moral imperative.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the end of this intervention I would like to reiterate my thanks to Francois-Xavier de Donn ea and the MEDEA institute and to wish you all a fruitful and animated debate. I look forward very much to the conclusions of today's work.