

Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union

**EU-Statement on the Tolerance Implementation Meeting on
Promoting Inter-Cultural, Inter-Religious and Inter-Ethnic
Understanding, Almaty, 12-13 June**

1. The Member States of the EU attach great importance to the outcome of this Tolerance Implementation Meeting, which was welcomed by the Council of the European Union on 27 February of this year. It is one more occasion to strengthen our policies in response to a major challenge of our time: Upholding the universal values of mutual tolerance and respect. In a period of rapid change, of globalization and migration, the urgency of finding adequate answers can only increase.
2. We are thankful to the government of Kazakhstan for organizing the conference and for its hospitality. The venue is well chosen as the peoples of Central Asia - diverse in culture and traditions - have much to tell us about their experience of coexistence and cooperation. The meeting is also very timely in view of the OSCE contribution to the Alliance of Civilisations initiative.
3. Let me make a few remarks on the EU experience - without thereby prejudging statements by Member States speaking on specific issues.
4. The European Union is itself a good example of how to overcome national and cultural divisions - and how to manage diversity. The Union is built on the fundamental values of democracy, pluralism and tolerance. A basic document, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union - proclaimed in Nice in December 2000 - duly emphasises the respect of the diversity of cultures and traditions of the peoples of Europe.
5. Much has been done to implement these principles that can serve as an input to our debate. Current EU-measures include a set of anti-discrimination Directives on employment equality and on racial equality, which the majority of EU Member States has already transposed into their national legal framework, thus laying the basis

for strengthened awareness and practice in this area. The promotion of intercultural understanding is also central to a number of the European Commission's instruments, including the mobility actions of the Leonardo, Socrates and Comenius programmes. One of the central objectives of the YOUTH Community Action Programme is to help eliminate all forms of discrimination through the promotion of equality and of a better understanding of the diversity of European culture.

6. A noteworthy event took place on 30 May: The Commission and the Presidency jointly organised a meeting of leaders and representatives of the leading world religions in Brussels. While they could build on a solid tradition of similar initiatives in a number of member countries, this event was a novelty in EU history on Community level.

7. The Council already spoke out on the subject of respect for religious beliefs and freedom of expression in its conclusions of 27 February: "Freedom of expression is a fundamental right and an essential element of a democratic discourse, with an independent judiciary as a safeguard mechanism. Free media are indispensable to a free and open society and to accountable systems of government. Freedoms, however, come with responsibilities. Freedom of expression should be exercised in a spirit of respect for religious and other beliefs and convictions. Mutual tolerance and respect are universal values we should all uphold."

8. The promotion of tolerance is always work in progress. This makes the work of one EU institution all the more important. I am speaking of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia. With the help of reporting offices in all member states, it gathers and publishes objective, comparable data on racism, xenophobia, islamophobia and anti-Semitism. It presents good practices in dealing with those phenomena, encourages a continuous informed dialogue between national/local Government and minority communities and assists in formulating concrete policies.

9. The aim of the Union to safeguard cohesion in our society, true integration, to promote tolerance and to fight discrimination cannot be achieved without a wider international effort - of which this Almaty Meeting is part. The EU is therefore committed to a number of concrete initiatives outside its borders. With an eye to our

partners I wish to single out the Barcelona and the ASEM process as well as the recent Euro-Mediterranean Conference on "Racism, Xenophobia and the Media (Towards Respect and Understanding of all Religions and Cultures)" in Vienna which ended with over 40 practical proposals.

10. In conclusion: What can we achieve in this Almaty meeting? The EU welcomes the focus on the role not only of governments, but also of civil society. Ultimately, success will be measured by the advance of tolerance at the community level. All ideas and initiatives that - in a not too distant future - can make a difference at the community level will be particularly welcome.