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Croatian Presidency of the
Vijećem Europske unije
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European Commission

EQUINET
European Network
of Equality Bodies

FIGHTING DISCRIMINATION ON GROUNDS OF RELIGION AND ETHNICITY: VULNERABILITIES OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES AND THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 CRISIS

Brussels

Thursday 18th June 2020

Summary Report

Overview of the conference:

The conference was jointly organised by the **European Commission, the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the EU** and **EQUINET**. It was prompted and chaired by the Commission Coordinator on combating anti-Muslim hatred, **Tommaso Chiamparino**. The conference focused on the effects of COVID-19 crisis on exacerbating inequalities and discrimination affecting more vulnerable groups, including Muslims; on how to fight intersectional discrimination in particular affecting Muslim women, and hate speech against Muslims. By exchanging good practices, participants discussed how to identify pathways for cooperation to fight discrimination, with a particular focus on how equality bodies could cooperate with authorities and civil society to support victims, as well as how to put in place preventative measures. More than 170 participants registered, from all EU Member States and some EEA countries too. Keynote speakers included representatives of the co-organising institutions, the director of the Fundamental Rights Agency, a member of the European Parliament. The panellists and participants were representatives of national authorities (law enforcement, ministries of Justice, interior or social affairs); representatives of equality bodies from nearly all Member States and beyond; civil society organisations and international organisations (Council of Europe; OSCE ODIHR).

Summary of the interventions, the panels and the discussions

The conference opened with a personal testimony from **Fatima Zibouh**, manager of the Inclusive/Antidiscrimination Office in Actiris, the Brussels employment agency. She described her experience and the challenges she had to overcome in her personal and professional life. Fatima also talked about the good practice initiative she is responsible for in Actiris, which offers the opportunity to victims of discrimination in employment to report and to be assisted in the follow up.

Silvan Agius, Cabinet expert for Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli, made an opening speech outlining the Commission's priorities on non-discrimination, equality, gender equality and intersectionality. He focused on the current legislative framework, plans regarding the Equal Treatment Directive, and policy initiatives that are in the pipeline. This was followed by an intervention from **Michael O'Flaherty**, Director of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, on the fundamental rights implications of discrimination and hatred against Muslims. He reiterated FRA support mentioning its database on anti-Muslim hatred, its work on preventing unlawful profiling and on hate crime reporting, recording and data collection. He also revealed a preview of the first results of the fundamental rights survey on the general population with respect to figures on intolerance against Muslims. These show for example, that there is still nearly one third of the population that would not favour the marriage of their sons/daughters with a Muslim person (full speech available here)

The conference continued with contributions on the challenges and responses of public institutions on the issue of anti-Muslim hatred and discrimination. **Samira Rafaela, MEP** (Renew Europe), emphasised how the recent killing of George Floyd in the USA was a product of systemic and structural racism. She called on the Commission to take action following the recent EP resolution, as race and religion are still taboos in the public domain in Europe. She stressed the importance of being honest about the challenges we face in this area and to deliver concrete and

tangible responses at all levels. **Patrick Charlier**, executive board member of EQUINET, stressed that if the standards set by equality bodies are respected, they can be highly effective in combating discrimination. He mentioned that equality bodies are currently noticing a rise in hate speech, and that Islamophobia has become too normalised. He emphasised that while the issues are dependent on the social and cultural background of each country, they can often be traced back to conflicts between a secular state and freedom of religion. He recalled that under the current EU legal framework, equality bodies cannot act on religious discrimination outside the field of employment unless the Member State has other specific legislation in this regard. **Mato Škrabalo**, Director-General at the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of Croatia, spoke about the Croatian Government's support for actions against racism and discrimination and stressed that this is firmly anchored in a human rights framework.

This was followed by a series of presentations on inequalities, inclusion and solidarity during COVID-19 crisis from the perspective of more vulnerable groups. **Elif Adam**, President of Dokustelle Austria, and **Chafika Attalai**, International Project Manager at the CCIF, presented a position paper signed by dozen of NGOs throughout the EU calling both EU institutions and Member State authorities to act in specific areas, such as ethnic police profiling, enforcement of existing legislation, and infringements in case of lack of implementation of EU legal framework on non-discrimination and hate crime; and the multiple discriminations faced by Muslim women. **Karen Taylor**, chair of ENAR, then spoke about how police brutality is often at the centre of structural racism. She stressed that this affects different racialised groups, and that there needs to be a proper consultation with civil society in order to design policy solutions. She emphasised the historically rooted racism in European society, a legacy of slavery and colonialism. She noted how in the current COVID19 crisis, migrants are disproportionately affected, particularly the undocumented ones. In Germany, black and brown nursing staff have been harassed by police and others going to work in private homes during the pandemic, accused of being 'out of place' in certain neighbourhoods. She noted that the racial equality directive does not cover policing. She called on the Commission to penalise Member States who are in breach of the framework decision on racism and xenophobia and to come forward with an overarching strategy to tackle structural racism which should include national action plans against racism and awareness raising activities.
This marked the beginning of the *first panel*, '**Multi-level cooperation: the role of local governments**'. First to speak was **Benedetto Zacchiroli**, President of the UNESCO-led European Coalition of Cities Against Racism (ECCAR), who described the initiatives being taken by the City of Bologna in Italy and by ECCAR itself, in particular referring to the upcoming general conference, announcing that it will feature a dedicated panel on inclusion of Muslim communities. **Irena Guidikova**, Head of Inclusion and anti-discrimination programmes at the Council of Europe (CoE), then described the establishment of European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) by the CoE in 1996 in order to monitor member states and take them to task on the issue of racism. She then presented the Council of Europe's initiative Intercultural cities stressing the intercultural integration approach, the first principle of which is to embrace diversity as an asset, not a threat. This was followed by a contribution from **Elisabeth Preuß**, Coordinator for Decentralized educational work and adult education for the city of Erlangen, Germany, in which she outlined the measures taken by the city of Erlangen to operationalise this approach. These include holding an open doors day at mosques throughout the city. The final presentation in this panel came from **Aleksa Đokić**, Government Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities in Croatia, in which he outlined the challenges facing the Roma community in Croatia, particularly in relation to the current COVID19 crisis. He noted also that one third of Roma in Croatia are Muslim. He highlighted the possible connections and synergies between the measures taken for a specific group and other vulnerable communities.

In the ensuing discussion, **Kahina Rabahi**, ENORB, raised the question as to why intercultural and interfaith work should put the emphasis on minorities to explain their traditions and cultures. She emphasised that minorities should not have to educate other people on these matters, and that this is a manifestation of structural and institutional racism, whereby instead public institutions need to address these problems themselves.

The *second panel,* **'Synergies between civil society, equality bodies and public authorities'**, began with a contribution from **Aljoša Gadžijev**, Adviser to the Advocate of the Principal of Equality, Slovenia. He outlined the role of the Advocate, the Slovenian equality body, including the possibility it has to request a constitutional review of legislation. He mentioned how within the Ministry of Culture in Slovenia there is the council of interreligious dialogue. The last meeting of the council however was lacking Muslim representation. There was dissatisfaction around failed legislation to allow for the ritual slaughter of animals, and around the fact that circumcision is only allowed for medical needs. So far, however, the Advocate has not received any official complaints in this regard and it is therefore unable to follow up on these issues. He finally re-iterated the intention to ensure proper consultation and dialogue with Muslim communities, looking for ways to overcome current barriers and lack of

trust. This was followed by a presentation from **Frederique Ast** and **Emilie Bourgeat**, Defenseur des Droits, France. They shared some statistics, including that 27,2% of Muslims in France report to have been discriminated against on grounds of religion. This compares to 14,6% of Jews and 2,1% of Christians. They outlined a number of actions taken by the French equality body to support victims of discrimination among the Muslim/Arab population, in particular Muslim women. In particular they mentioned how from victims reporting they managed to achieve changes, including by engaging with civil society organisations in strategic litigation activities, for example with policies on wearing the headscarf.

A question was asked in the discussion which followed by **Alexander Hoefmans**, Head of Unit Data Protection & Equal Opportunities, Belgian Ministry of Justice, requesting an example of cooperation between religious communities and digital platforms.

The first speaker of the *third panel*, **'Communication, information and outreach'**, was **Pedro Rojo**, Fundacion Al Fanar, Spain. He emphasised the rise in Islamophobic narratives and story telling in newspaper articles appearing in Spain between 2017 and 2019. He stressed that Islamophobia in the media is only now starting to be discussed, and that we need to train journalists in using non-stereotyped ways of presenting news and stories involving Muslims. **Hanna Attar**, CLAIM-Allianz, Germany, presented the work of the NGO to raise awareness of anti-Muslim hatred. She informed that 1st of July is the Day of combatting anti-Muslim hatred in Germany. She outlined the visual awareness raising campaign currently running with the motto "today, again" outlining the impact of anti-Muslim hatred. She encouraged participants to send pictures by email to join the campaign, and she announced that 21st September is the European Day against Islamophobia, calling for a general mobilisation of both civil society actors and public bodies.

In the following discussion **Dermana Seta**, Adviser on combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims at ODIHR, OSCE, made a brief intervention announcing that ODIHR has developed a new guide for identifying anti-Muslim hate crimes. Finally, **Linda Hyökki**, European Forum of Muslim Women, asked the question regarding what measures the city of Erlangen had taken to ensure integration of Muslim women in the job market, considering that the state of Bavaria does not allow headscarves to be worn in public spaces such as schools or courtrooms. **Elisabeth Preuß** responded that for all jobs which the city itself is responsible for headscarves are allowed, for example for crèche attendants. For the city of Erlangen it is important what is in the head, not what is on the head, she said.

Key conclusions and next steps:

The chair concluded highlighting the following immediate follow up deriving from the discussion in the conference:

- To intensify the work with cities in particular through the cooperation with the European Coalition of Cities Against Racism
- To further boost the cooperation, mutual understanding and engagement between equality bodies and civil society organisations. This will be further developed in a dedicated training taking place by the end of 2020
- To reflect on dedicated initiatives to foster diversity and non-discrimination of Muslims specifically in the area of employment and education
- To continue EU action in addressing anti-Muslim hatred as a form of racism, raising awareness about the importance of taking an intersectional perspective and of paying specific attention to the structural manifestations of racism