European Commission

Message by Frans Timmermans, First Vice-President of the European Commission, to the Muslim community on the occasion of European Action Day countering Hate Speech against Muslims and on the Islamic New Year

21st September is European Action Day countering Hate Speech against Muslims.

Today the Muslim community is also celebrating Islamic New Year, the day commemorating the emigration of the prophet from Mecca to Medina – the hijra – which marks the birth of Islam as a community united in faith.

The Muslim community, in all its diversity, has an important place in the European landscape.

Today it is important to seize the opportunities to strengthen dialogue and to assure our Muslim compatriots that they are not only key stakeholders in European society, but also that they can find in the European Commission a loyal friend who will help them to practice their faith and traditions in peace in our democratic societies.

While we see positive winds of change, this last decade has brought significant transformations which have been the source of challenges for Europe and its citizens. The economic crisis has had a profound effect on several Member States since 2007, while the recent increase in migration flows has never been so great in the history of the European Union.

These challenges have had a direct impact on European Muslims but the difficulties they face aren't always visible. Today, the European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency is publishing a major survey on discrimination felt by Muslims in Europe. The study shows that almost one in three Muslims felt discriminated against during their search for employment, while only 12% of Muslim respondents say that they reported or filed a complaint about discrimination which they suffered in their daily life. These findings are worrying as they highlight the way in which European Muslims are treated differently in their daily lives, as well as a sense of powerlessness when faced with these cases of injustice.

The report also points to the confidence which the large majority (76%) of first and second generation European Muslims have in public institutions, as well as their strong sense of attachment to their countries of residence.

Terrorist attacks perpetrated in recent decades have targeted European society in its entirety and did not spare our Muslim citizens. Some of these attacks were designed to further divide our society by specifically targeting our Jewish citizens and the diversity which is Europe's strength. However, religious communities have raised their voices in favour of fraternity. Indeed, on 30 May this year, an Action Day against Antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred brought together Jewish and Muslim organisations to discuss the situation and the fight to safeguard the cohesion among the people of Europe.

In December 2015, I nominated a Commission Coordinator on combating anti-Muslim hatred whose job it is to take stock of the challenges faced by European Muslims. The Commission is listening to the concerns of its Muslim population.

All our citizens must find in the EU an open space for ideas, which is why freedom of expression will remain one of the European Commission's priorities. This is a fundamental right, but we will not tolerate it being used as an excuse for illegal on-line hate speech; the Commission firmly condemns incitement to hatred and violence. This year's monitoring exercise of the Code of Conduct on combating hate speech – signed by major social media companies and the European Commission – shows that this form of online hate speech is widespread. Almost 18% of the illegal content reported during the last monitoring exercise targeted Muslims. One year later we see clear results which we must pursue. We are encouraged to continue and expand our fight against hate speech, discrimination, hate crime as well as ethnic profiling.

Because Europeans with a Muslim background should not be defined solely by their faith, we have invited Muslim university students from across Europe to discuss the Future of Europe on the 28th September in the European Parliament. Faced with the challenges of the past decade, our common European project needs to be rethought together, and it is against this backdrop that the European Commission published its White Paper on the Future of Europe. The Commission attaches a particular importance to young people, to their ideas and to their ability to cultivate change while fighting prejudice. For this reason, and because they represent Europe's future, the Commission is encouraging young people to make their voices heard.

The European Union's cultural, religious and humanist roots have inspired and shaped our universal values and human rights. Because Muslims are part of Europe's culture, they should never be worried about being able to practice their religion. The 60th anniversary of Treaty of Rome reminds us that the European project built its foundations on a common desire for peace and solidarity among peoples and that we must safeguard this heritage above all else.

I wish you all a fruitful and happy New Year

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FRA Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey - Muslims – Selected findings:

http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2017/eumidis-ii-muslims-selected-findings

http://fra.europa.eu/en/media/press-packs/eumidis-II-Muslims