

Press Release

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European Muslims are stigmatised by populist rhetoric

Strasbourg, 28.10.2010 - European countries appear to face another crisis beyond budget deficits – the disintegration of human values. One symptom is the increasing expression of intolerance towards Muslims, says the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg, in his latest [Human Rights Comment](#) published today.

The Swiss referendum banning the building of minarets was no exception: opinion polls in several European countries reflect fear, suspicion and negative opinions of Muslims and Islamic culture.

These Islamophobic prejudices are combined with racist attitudes – directed not least against people originating from Turkey, Arab countries and South Asia. Muslims with this background are discriminated in the labour market and the education system in a number of European countries. There are reports showing that they tend to be targeted by police in repeated identity controls and intrusive searches. This is a serious human rights problem.

Recent elections have seen extremist political parties gaining ground after aggressively Islamophobic campaigns. Even more worrying is the inertia or confusion which seems to have befallen the established democratic parties in this situation. Compromises are made which tend to give an air of legitimacy to crude prejudices and open xenophobia.

Public opinion response: limit religious freedom of Muslims

When the German President Christian Wulff in a recent speech confirmed the obvious, that Islam – like Christianity and Judaism - is part of the national context, this was seen as controversial. One newspaper reported that two thirds of the population disagreed.

A more ambitious survey initiated by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung showed that 58 per cent agreed that "religious practices for Muslims in Germany should be seriously limited". Though not totally clear, this statement appears to reject freedom of religion for one group – Muslims. The broad support for this opinion is a bad sign.

Interestingly, there were huge regional differences in the responses to the survey. In the eastern part of the country – with a much smaller Muslim population - support for the statement was as high as 76 per cent. Distance and ignorance tend to increase suspicions.

Politicians should not ride the populist wave

This appears to be a general phenomenon: lack of knowledge feeds prejudices. Political leaders have on the whole failed to counter Islamophobic stereotypes.

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Of course, this became more difficult after the terrorist attacks in New York, Madrid, London, Amsterdam and also Beslan and Moscow. However, the emotions caused by these horrible crimes called for systematic efforts to establish a distinction between the evildoers and the overwhelming majority of Muslims. These efforts were rarely made.

Neither has sufficient priority been given to analysing what makes some people listen to hateful propaganda against Muslims. Part of the explanation appears to be the same ignorance, fear and frustration which have caused bigotry against Roma and immigrants in general. We have learnt that minorities are sometimes turned into scapegoats by people who feel alienated and ignored by those in power. It is important to seek full explanations.

President Wulff was of course right: Islam is already part of our culture. Muslims in Europe – including the approximately 1.6 million Muslims in the United Kingdom, 3.8 million in Germany, 5 million in France and 15-20 million in Russia - contribute to our economies and societies. They belong. Most of them are in fact born in these countries, the majority are not particularly religious and very few can be characterised as Islamists.

Bigotry is not part of European values

The diverse groups of Muslims are now blamed by politicians in some countries for not “assimilating”. However, integration is a two-way process based on mutual understanding. Anti-Muslim bigotry has in fact become a major obstacle to respectful relationships. Indeed, the Islamophobic atmosphere has probably been a factor enabling extremists in some cases to recruit young and embittered individuals who lack a sense of belonging.

Instead of discussing such problems seriously, we have had a debate about methods to penalise women wearing the niqab and to prevent the building of minarets. This is hardly the way to give depth to our *European values*.

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