Thank you very much for inviting me here today. As a child of immigrants and a citizen of many backgrounds, the challenges of creating intercultural societies is an issue I hold dear. The rise in xenophobic rhetoric is not solely a European issue – even the global power is not immune. But in order to address how we can create more cohesive and peaceful societies within Europe, we must first recognize what has brought us to this point.

In our increasingly interdependent world, with global trade, new technologies and the aftermath of major political upheavals, including two world wars, decolonization, the Cold war and the Arab uprisings, we have seen increased global movement. This, along with policies employed by governments, has had significant effects on internal ethnic diversity, resulting in a rapid evolution of the individual and collective identity.

What becomes key then, are the actions and policies undertaken with the influx of new citizens over the past generations. Having been born and raised in Canada, which, unlike Europe, has actively constructed multiculturalism as key to its national identity, I can say with conviction that the narrow definition of "European identity,", often portrayed to be diminished by the inclusion of others, has reproduced a political myth. A political myth that a homogeneous western civilization existed in the past. A political myth that it can be reestablished today through the exclusion of others identified as cultural aliens. A political myth that has now become a source of increasing security and social disintegration.

Yet, it is important to note that the current situation Europe finds itself in is largely due to the effects of poor state governance – from the rise of anti democratic and xenophobic political parties in Europe, to the promotion of fear by media which has led to a greater public belief that multiculturalism is a security threat. This dangerous generalization which confines all citizens negatively, has created a discourse of fear, one that has become a governmental instrument used to steer and control the actions and attitudes of citizens. These extremely crippled, and often alienating responses from policy makers, have made it clear that the mismanagement of diverse societies leads to conflict, radicalization, and even violence

Given these highly negative implications, it becomes necessary to examine the basis of viewing multiculturalism as a threat to state security, and more importantly, to be aware of the political intentions behind the increasing fear (and subsequent securitization) of minorities, ethno-religious groups and migrants. Only once that is done can we create policies which address the clear societal and security dimensions.

So what needs to be done? I've identified four key ways in which we can address this issue.

1.   The question of "European identity"

It is often cited that European identity is diluted by the active inclusion of minorities and the development of intercultural societies. In fact, it has been this narrative of protecting "European identity" which has driven detrimental policies which have forced assimilation or simply ignored other communities. I have often asked my European friends what European identity means to them. They generically list, "value for human rights, integrity, cooperation" – all qualities which people globally share, and none of which are diminished by the inclusion of others within intercultural societies.

Yet, when pressed, a colleague of mine, stated to me that "there is an inherent contradiction in the definition of a 'European identity'" and European values, as one is based on exclusion, and the other prides itself on cooperation. Europe, despite its efforts to hide it, is a very Christo based society; the core of western Europe or the cradle is Christianity. Now, that is not to say that religion is strong in modern

European countries, or that the church has significant control. What it means is that the underlying values or modus operandi can be traced back to Christianity and its unique development and impact on societies at large. Now, the outsiders, people who often do not share this underlying narrative, become a threat to these values. And, in this, Europe is not alone – other countries globally have the same belief that their own national identity is "under attack" when faced with the same situation – yet the difference is that Europe prides itself, and champions the title of enlightened human rights defender and global cooperation. And I can not see anything more enlightened, more in defense of human rights, and more cooperative than not only the creation of intercultural societies within Europe, but the embracement of those fleeing from war, persecution and death.

European identity must be redefined – through strategic communication and outreach – to encompass people of all backgrounds and cultures as key to the building of national and European identities. These ought to reflect the contemporary realities of our increasingly intercultural societies and positively feature diversity, pluralism and respect for human rights and dignity. This must be done through a radical change in political discourse and action so that new ways can be found to celebrate cultural diversity as a positive factor for innovation and development. States should make this a strategic long-term objective by developing a comprehensive "Intercultural Strategy" which focuses on awareness raising and public engagement, cohesion among stakeholders, countering racism, planning for diversity and building an intercultural economy.

Lastly, and arguably the most important for sustainable development, is the recognition of negative rhetoric which divides citizens. If we do not recognise and actively eliminate racist attitudes portrayed by the media and by policymakers alike, we will continue to divide society. We will continue to isolate citizens as 'the other', continue to marginalise them as 'un-European' and unwanted. And if they do not feel wanted, if they do not feel European, we will never have a cohesive and harmonious society. .

2.   Education:

We have all heard the phrase, "history belongs to the victor," a belief clearly evident in the education systems and curricula. For the past year I have been invited to numerous primary and secondary schools throughout Europe. Having spoken with local communities, their teachers and parents, I believe a lot can be accomplished through a more comprehensive educational approach – one which embraces European historical reality.

The educational curricula divorced from reality, does not give other nations, other people their due. It does not recognize the bleak colonial history of Europe, and the role it played in not only shaping the world, but also in the exploitation of other countries and people.

So while it may not be fair to say that Europe was built by immigrants, it is very fair to say that Europe, as it exists today, would not have been possible without people of other backgrounds – be it during the times of colonization or in post world war 2 recovery. The educational system must advance to reflect the accurate histories of Europe and the global community. Given that people of multiple cultural and ethnic backgrounds are often cited as taking from Europe, it becomes imperative to address this through education, and political and media messaging.

Additionally, formal citizenship education - for all, in any European school - which serves to emphasize the importance of pluralism, respect and anti-xenophobic behavior is key. This will ensure that

children and young people acquire social, civic and intercultural competences, by promoting international democratic values and fundamental rights, social inclusion and non-discrimination, as well as active citizenship.

3. Intercultural initiatives:

Intercultural initiatives are also key, and informal support should be given to them.Emphasis should be placed on ensuring members of groups subject to discrimination and stigmatization participate in the creation of policies and projects designed to counter cultural stereotyping, as well as the institutionalization of these mechanisms.

Policy makers are key here, as it is only with their engagement and support that both real and virtual spaces can be developed, providing facilities for cultural interaction, especially where inter-community conflict exists.

Lastly, the deliberate support of cultural activities - much as our own Prime Minister has publicly done with first nations ceremonies in Canada, in an effort to symbolize and promote reconciliation between communities within an overall process of cultural rapprochement.

4. Addressing Inequalities

And lastly, even with positive political, education and cultural policies, it is undeniable that creating intercultural peaceful societies will be difficult without addressing existing economic and opportunity inequalities, which act as a fertile ground for racism, division, and radicalisation. .
This means providing all children and young people with the necessary knowledge, skills and competences to build their own professional pathways to success, encouraging measures to reduce early school leaving and improving the social and professional integration of all young people.
Leadership must be taken from the business community to ensure that all potential employees are given equal opportunities, regardless of name or ethnic background.

It is also key to amplify the successful experiences and voices of those from marginalized communities who have had opportunities, and who do work within the public, private or media sectors to return to their communities and create positive narratives. They should be seen as role-models, and create trust for a system which often lacks it in their local communities.

While I recognize that what I have proposed is not easy, I want to assure you - cultural and societal transformation never is - it will take generations, and it will take the conviction of policy makers who no longer want to remain reactive to the increasing insecurities at home. Only a few months ago I was visiting a refugee camp when a young girl, awaiting her papers to migrate, said to me "Why are they so worried about one of us going to Europe? They have sent thousands to fight us." And while some may not see them as "European" that's what the 6000 fighters in Syria are. They are European. Her words have stuck with me ever since, and I leave you with them today to recognize that in our increasingly small world, European obstacles to create intercultural societies impacts everyone. And if the concerns and grievances of local populations are not addressed, and intercultural societies are not created, we will continue to see these obstacles impact us more negatively, and as we have already seen in Paris, more locally.

Dr. Alaa Murabit Speech: Rising to the challenges of creating intercultural societies at local level for Council of Europe
March 22 2016 – 10 minutes, 4:30 pm.