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CSC Briefing on Intercultural Dialogue within the European Union

INTRODUCTION

This year the European Union celebrates the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (EYID). In addition to festivities, the EU is developing its policies with regard to culture. Although culture is a policy area where Member States enjoy exclusive competencies, there are growing expectations that the Union will take the lead in a number of processes related to it. Intercultural dialogue is a part of this wider agenda on culture.

WHY EUROPEAN YEAR OF INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE?

The reasons behind the decision to designate 2008 as the Year of Intercultural Dialogue are manifold. For one, it has been highlighted that integration has always been a dialogue between cultures; building Europe has meant integrating histories, value systems and worldviews. Culture, and in particular intercultural dialogue, is increasingly seen, along with economics and politics, as a pillar of the European integration process. Secondly, as the Europe's cultural landscape has grown more diverse as a consequence of globalisation, EU enlargement and migration (both inside Europe and to Europe), the challenges and problems related to multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity have created a need for more dialogue. Besides idealistic endeavours concerning open societies, the economic considerations play a role for increased attention to the issue. The cultural and creative sector represents 2.6 % of European GDP in comparison to 1.9 % for the food, beverage and tobacco industries. This sector needs to be nourished. Furthermore, education systems must be able to deal with diversity. This, according to EU Commissioner Jan Figel, is "a litmus test of the wellbeing of our societies." Figel, as the spokesman for culture and education, highlights that besides gaining skills, education is a path to social inclusion and active citizenship. His colleagues in charge of economic and employment policies see here a vital link to

making sure that future generations and citizens of today's Europe - especially those with migrant background - integrate into labour markets. (Concerns have already been expressed concerning the instrumentalisation of culture for the sake of furthering the EU Lisbon objectives.)

In addition, it has been argued that in the midst of discussions about crisis in Europe and about future of Europe, culture can give a decisive contribution to the European unity: values and political force.

WHAT IT AIMS TO ACHIEVE?

The decision concerning the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue was taken in December 2006. The year aims to:

- raise the awareness of all those living in the EU, in particular young people, about the importance of engaging in intercultural dialogue;
- identify and share best practices to promote intercultural dialogue especially among youth and children;
- foster the role of education in teaching about diversity, increase understanding of other cultures, highlight the role of media in promoting equality and mutual understanding;
- enhance the profile of all community programmes and actions contributing to intercultural dialogue and ensure their continuity; and
- contribute to exploring new approaches to intercultural dialogue involving cooperation between wide range of stakeholders from different sectors.

Furthermore, the year seeks to promote open cultural environment and create a sense of European citizenship. Diversity should not be understood as a threat, but as an enrichment of society. Strategies for peaceful living together should be promoted. Moreover, the year begins the mainstreaming of intercultural dialogue to all Union policies.

FIRST EUROPEAN STRATEGY ON CULTURE

In May 2007 the European Commission approved its first ever strategy document on culture, a Communication on a European agenda for culture in a globalizing world. According to the Communication, "the European Union is not just an economic process or a trading power, it is already widely - and accurately - perceived as an unprecedented and successful social and cultural project." The document further highlights that "culture' has an anthropological meaning. It is the basis for a symbolic world of meanings, beliefs, values, traditions which are expressed in language, art, religion and myths. As such, it plays a fundamental role in human development and in the complex fabric of the identities and habits of individuals and communities."

More concretely, the European Agenda for Culture set the following strategic objectives for EU cultural policies:

- Promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue;
- Promotion of culture as a catalyst for creativity in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs;
- Promotion of culture as a vital element in the Union's international relations.

The communication proposed the open method of coordination (OMC) as the method for EU-level cooperation in this area. The OMC consists in agreeing on common objectives, regularly monitoring following up progress towards them and exchanging best practices and relevant data in order to foster mutual learning. The OMC is already used as a soft method of co-operation in several policy areas (e.g. social inclusion, education, employment and youth).

The objectives of the Communication were debated in the first ever Cultural Forum organised by the Portuguese EU Presidency in Lisbon on 26-27 September (more information at the CSC November Briefing on Intercultural Dialogue and in Europe Update N° 11). Following the consultation, the EU Member States agreed in October that as regards promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, they wish to:

- Encourage the mobility of artists and other professionals in the cultural field;
- Promote cultural heritage by facilitating the mobility of collections and fostering the process of digitisation, with a view to improving public access to different forms of cultural and linguistic expressions;
- Promote intercultural dialogue as a sustainable process contributing to European identity, citizenship and social cohesion, including by the development of the intercultural competencies of citizens.

Under the heading "culture as a vital element of international relations", the EU countries agreed to foster intercultural dialogue and interaction between civil societies of EU Member States and third countries."

CURRENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

In the October Council Conclusions Member States further articulated the plans concerning the introduction of OMC in the field of culture. The OMC will be used "in a specifically adapted way."

According to the European Commission, the introduction of the OMC is only a way to create a coherent framework for the existing tools and mechanisms (Culture Programme, Europe for Citizens Programme, expert groups etc.).

Participation of Member States in the process will be voluntary. The objectives of the European Agenda for Culture will be implemented through triennial work plans

covering a limited number of priority areas. The first work plan covers the period 2008-2010.

The priority areas for the first three-year period manifest the EU's practical approach in the area of culture. Intercultural dialogue does not feature high in the priorities. The religious dimension of intercultural dialogue is not mentioned at all.

The priorities include:

- Improving the conditions for the mobility of artists and other professionals in the cultural field;
- Promoting access to culture, in particular through the promotion of cultural heritage, multilingualism, digitisation, cultural tourism, synergies with education, especially art education, and greater mobility of collections;
- Developing data, statistics and methodologies in the cultural sector and improve their comparability;
- Maximising the potential of cultural and creative industries, in particular that of SMEs;
- Promoting and implementing the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

Already last year, before that the OMC was officially adopted, Member States were invited to submit their National Strategies on ICD. In order to gather background information on the issue in view of future action, the European Union also commissioned a study "Sharing Diversity: National Approaches to Intercultural Dialogue in Europe". The study is envisaged to be published in these days.

Contents of the report include:

- Intercultural Dialogue: Identifying and assessing impulses or trigger issues
- Understanding ICD in selected sectors
- A legal environment for intercultural dialogue
- National actors and the diversity of approaches to intercultural dialogue
- National approaches, strategies and policies relating to ICD
- Sector specific ICD policies and strategies
- From policy to practice: assessing projects and experiments
- Conclusions and recommendations

According to preliminary information, the study will among other issues highlight that intercultural dialogue depends upon the full implementation of human, civic, economic, social and cultural rights.

At the EU Council level, the focus of the Slovenian EU Presidency is on intercultural competencies. At the moment the Cultural Affairs Committee of the Council is preparing conclusions on the topic for the May Council meeting. It is not yet clear what will be the policy emphases of the French EU Presidency.

CHANGES IN RHETORICS ON INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

Commissioner Jan Figel has used this year to further the debates on intercultural dialogue in the EU arena. In comparison to what the Church and Society Commission (CSC) and Churches Commission for Migrants' in Europe (CCME) advocated in their joint response to the Council of Europe White Paper consultation on Intercultural Dialogue his interventions can be considered very welcome. Figel is pushing the EU – Member States, EU institutions and citizens – to move from multicultural societies to intercultural ones. The concept of multiculturalism has been met with criticism as it often implies a political programme. Intercultural as a notion and as a vision reflects better that cultures as well as individuals are dynamic and change in encounters with one another. Secondly, Figel is trying to change the discourse on tolerance to that of respect. Thirdly, he is repeatedly calling for integration to be understood as an equal access to participation. This approach underlines the responsibility of host societies in ensuring that migrants are enabled to become active citizens. The demands for “full integration” have tended rather one-sidedly to evaluate the performance of a migrant with regard to learning the language, acquiring skills and finding. Integration has also been misunderstood as assimilation of migrants.

RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

“the peaceful coexistence of cultures and religions --- both in the EU and its relations with peoples of in all parts of the world – is the utmost importance for our shared future” Pöttering

“Engaging in constructive dialogue with people of different faiths and convictions is a key element of intercultural dialogue.” Figel

The current EU leadership acknowledges the importance of religious dimension of intercultural dialogue. However, this recognition hardly translates into concrete actions and is even less visible at the policy level. It is interesting to compare the priorities set for the EU's future action on ICD (see page 4) with the comments made after the exchange on intercultural dialogue between the ministers in charge of integration issues during the German EU Presidency in May 2007. The only issue transmitted to the press afterwards was the dialogue with Islam. The President of the meeting, Minister Wolfgang Schäuble stated: “our first exchange concerning intercultural dialogue was extremely productive. Many Member States have begun a dialogue with representatives of Muslim communities in particular. It was clear that we are facing similar challenges all over Europe. People of diverse backgrounds, faiths and cultures are living side by side in densely populated areas, and it is important to enhance co-existence among them, whether at school, at work or on the street.”

The meeting held between CSC and the Council of Europe Ambassadors of the Nordic and Baltic States at the beginning of April witnessed the same. The only issue that really seemed to raise the interest of the government representatives in relation to intercultural dialogue was the relations with Muslim communities.

On the contrary, in exchange with the desk officers of the European Commission in charge of intercultural dialogue, it has become clear that the religious dimension is not in their focus.

Therefore, to generalise one could say that at the level of Community policies the EU does not tackle the religious aspects. The EU addresses religion on the political level. The initiatives on the issue, reported in the next chapter, seemed to be prepared outside the policy framework of intercultural dialogue and are more of an *ad hoc* nature.

When asked about the quasi inexistence of the religious dimension in the EU's strategy on culture and in its work plans, the Commission officials replied commenting that this aspect is well covered by media. In other words, there exists a miss-match between "the real work" carried by the Commission regarding the domain and its public image. The Commission officials also pointed out that the EU does not have competence concerning religion. On the other hand, it does deal with it when it feels necessary and the greatest necessity until now has been seen in mapping the EU Member States relations with Muslims. The discussions in the German Presidency meeting, quoted-above, were followed up by a report on these relations which will be published this summer.

EUROPEAN LEVEL ACTIVITIES

The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue happens at all levels. In addition to numerous local and national level activities (documented on the official website of EYID 2008), concrete action is carried at the European level.

The Slovenian EU Presidency held the opening conference in Ljubljana in January 2008 (more in Europe Update N° 14). The religious dimension was not included. In addition to numerous art events, the Slovenian presidency will also hold conferences on "Europe, the world and humanity in the 21st century (10-13 April) and on EU Foreign Policy and Culture (14-15 May).

The European Commission organises seven "Brussels debates" of which one is about interreligious dialogue. Among its many other activities, at least one more is planned, which relates to the religious dimension. The Commission is at an early stage of planning a Conference on Inter-religious dialogue for youth to be held in October (please consult the official website of EYID for more information on activities).

The European Parliament has given a priority for the Middle East. In the course of the year several distinguished personalities will address the plenary. The invited speakers include: the Grand Mufti of Syria, the President of Ghana and current President of the Council of the African Union John Kufuor, Pope Benedict XVI, the Dalai Lama, the United Nations Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon as well as Presidents Abbas and Peres of Palestine and Israel. Peres had been invited to speak on April 10 but had to cancel.

The individual committees and inter-parliamentary delegations are taking various initiatives, including guest speakers, as part of their regular work. The Parliament will also hold special African and Arab weeks.

The high-level meeting of 5 May between religious leaders and the presidents of the institutions is also considered as an event of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue as it will, besides climate change, discuss intercultural dialogue.

WHO IS INVOLVED?

The EU considers the Civil Society Platform as its key partner among the non-governmental actors. The platform, initiated by the European Forum for Arts and Heritage, the European Cultural Foundation and the Network of European Foundations, gathers around 170 organisations acting in the field of intercultural dialogue. The other partners include representatives of Member States, regional and local authorities and media. Churches and religious communities are not specifically mentioned in the official documents. Yet, as stated, religions are involved in the more political processes.

Attention has also been given to the Soul for Europe initiative. This can be interpreted as a wish to give intercultural dialogue a spiritual dimension. The NGO now bearing the name Soul for Europe has, however, nothing to do with the initiative which used to be linked with the Ecumenical Centre in Brussels. The 'new Soul' has, nevertheless, quickly filled the gap opened by the disappearance of the 'old Soul.' Whether the decision to close down the churches' activity under this heading was premature, might now give rise to self-criticism.

CSC INVOLVEMENT

The main project of CSC in relation to EYID is the organisation of four seminars on Islam, Christianity and Europe together with the Commission of Bishops' Conference of the European Community (COMECE) and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), in association with Muslim partners. The seminars are hosted by the European Parliament. The themes of the seminars are:

17 April

Intercultural dialogue: response to which problems? Christian and Muslim perspectives.

29 May

Visibility of religion in the European public space: the question of worship places and religious symbols in clothing.

3 July

'Christian Europe' and Islam in Europe

11 September

The external relations of the European Union with Muslim countries and international responsibility of religious communities.

The target audience of the seminars are EU politicians and civil servants. The main rationale is to expose the complexity of issues linked to Islam, Christianity and Europe and by doing that to question stereotypes. Each seminar is to be arranged in the form of a panel discussion with a moderator, an academic expert, a Muslim speaker, a Christian speaker and a Member of the European Parliament in charge of the synthesis. All members of the CEC-CCEE Committee for Relations with Muslims in Europe (CRME) have been invited. Both Christian speakers from CSC side are members of CRME.

In addition, CSC monitors and takes parts in other activities related to the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. CSC has been present in the Culture Forum and in the official launch of the EYID and is involved in the high-level meeting of 5 May.

MORE INFORMATION

The official Commission website for intercultural dialogue:
http://ec.europa.eu/culture/eac/dialogue/dialogue_en.html.

The website for the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008:
<http://www.interculturaldialogue2008.eu/>

Draft Council Resolution on a European Agenda for culture - Adoption of the Resolution, 31 October 2007 (adopted in the December European Council meeting)
<http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/07/st14/st14485.en07.pdf>

Communication on a European agenda for culture in a globalising world:
http://ec.europa.eu/culture/eac/communication/pdf_word/COM_2007_242_en.pdf

The website of the Cultural Forum: <http://www.culturalforum.pt>

The CEC website on intercultural dialogue including the joint CSC-CCME response to the Council of Europe White Paper consultation on Intercultural Dialogue and the members' individual responses: <http://www.cec-kek.org/content/intercultural.shtml>



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