



Conference of European Churches  
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## CSC Briefing on the Council of Europe “White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue”

### THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE IN BRIEF

Founded in 1949, the Council of Europe (COE) is today an international organisation of 47 member states. Its statutes stipulate as its aim “to achieve a greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realizing the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and facilitating their economic and social progress.” CoE seeks to develop common and democratic principles based on the European Convention on Human Rights and other reference texts on the protection of individuals. CoE has the following objectives:<sup>1</sup>

- to protect human rights, pluralist democracy and the rule of law;
- to promote awareness and encourage the development of Europe's cultural identity and diversity
- to find common solutions to the challenges facing European society: such as discrimination against minorities, xenophobia, intolerance, bioethics and cloning, terrorism, trafficking in human beings, organised crime and corruption, cybercrime, violence against children;
- to consolidate democratic stability in Europe by backing political, legislative and constitutional reform.

CoE predates the European Union (founded 1957) and the Organisation for Security & Co-operation in Europe (founded as the CSCE in 1975). The diversity of membership is reflected in the CoE chairmanship passing from Russia to San Marino in November 2006 and again from San Marino to Serbia in May 2007.

### THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE INVOLVEMENT IN INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

Intercultural dialogue is a priority issue for CoE. Even if the term “intercultural dialogue” is a much more recent invention, CoE views itself as a platform for such dialogue since its beginnings in 1949. The fact that one of the first European conventions developed by CoE was the European Cultural Convention<sup>2</sup> of 1954 may serve as proof of this.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.coe.int/T/e/Com/about\\_coe/](http://www.coe.int/T/e/Com/about_coe/)

<sup>2</sup> <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/Treaties/Html/018.htm>

Back in the late 1970s the idea of intercultural dialogue appeared on the scene as part of education for successful integration. The focus then shifted and intercultural dialogue became recognized as something essential for cultivating and promoting democratic values such as tolerance and peace. The 1990s ethnic conflicts in the Balkans and the rise of Islamic terrorism prompted CoE to intensify its efforts in intercultural dialogue as an instrument of conflict prevention. In 2005 the 3<sup>rd</sup> Summit of Heads of State and Government of CoE explicitly endorsed intercultural dialogue as a means of ensuring that the diversity of European cultures becomes a source of mutual enrichment.

The Faro Conference of 2005 is considered to be a milestone in CoE's actions concerning intercultural dialogue. The "Faro Declaration" places intercultural dialogue in the context of the overall remit of CoE to promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law, to strengthen social cohesion, peace and stability. The Declaration thus clears the ground for the "mainstreaming" of intercultural dialogue in all working areas of CoE.

In order to boost intercultural dialogue, CoE decided to prepare a White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue. The objectives of the White Paper, foreseen to be published in early 2008, are twofold:

- a) It shall formulate a coherent and long-term policy for the promotion of intercultural dialogue within Europe and between Europe and its neighbouring regions, namely the southern Mediterranean, the Middle East and Central Asia.
- b) It shall serve as a reference document to policy makers and practitioners at national, regional and local levels, providing them with guidelines and analytical and methodological tools for the promotion of intercultural dialogue.

The character of the White Paper, therefore, is that of a document suggesting policies and initiatives and providing standards and tools in order to promote the dynamic process of intercultural dialogue in most different contexts.

## **THE WHITE PAPER PROCESS**

As CoE views intercultural dialogue as a concern of the whole of society, the White Paper process started in early 2007 with a broad consultation involving as many stakeholders of society as possible. Thus along with a general consultation paper, special questionnaires were addressed to governments, NGOs, journalists, migrant communities and religious communities.

It is remarkable that CoE, which is committed to the separation of church and state, did directly address religious communities and explicitly talks about a religious dimension of intercultural dialogue. In the past, religion and religious bodies have hardly been on the agenda of CoE except in relation to the fundamental right of religious freedom. The reasons for this change are various and not very clear-cut. The attitude towards religion changed with the accession of the states from Central and Eastern Europe to CoE. Moreover, the religious dimension of the 1990s conflicts in the Balkans and the emergence of Islamism drew attention to religion in the political sphere. Acknowledging that religions have mainly been seen as problems, the invitation of CoE for the religious communities to take part in the consultation process has been an important possibility for them to show the positive impact religions and churches have in shaping society.

## CSC INVOLVEMENT IN THE WHITE PAPER PROCESS

CSC and the Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) took part in the above-mentioned consultation in two ways:

- a) First, both organisations asked their member churches and organisations to share their experience in the field of intercultural dialogue in answering the questionnaires CoE had issued and in submitting examples of good practice from the field of intercultural dialogue. (We thank all contributors for their participation in this consultation!)
- b) The second part of CSC/CEC and CCME's contribution to the White Paper consultation was a joint statement by the two organisations which can also be found on the website.

CoE has shown great interest in CSC/CEC and CCME's joint response and the 30 individual responses from the members. Cooperation between CSC and the coordinating office for intercultural dialogue within CoE has been excellent. The coordinator of this office, Mr. Ulrich Bunjes, delivered a speech at this year's CSC/CEC Commission meeting,<sup>3</sup> which took place in Armenia shortly after the contributions had been submitted.

Mr Bunjes highly appreciated the engagement of CSC and CCME in intercultural dialogue. In his speech Mr Bunjes called the joint response "very helpful and supportive" in a sense that it "emphasises a number of important aspects and drives the reflection process further, for instance with regard to the following issues:

- The anthropological value of dialogue
- The dignity of every person as the guiding principle of intercultural dialogue
- The dual impact of intercultural dialogue on minorities and majorities, and the need for a shift in the thinking of majorities
- The role of socio-economic factors
- The 'added value' of the Council of Europe action, its role in intercultural dialogue and the exemplary character of the White Paper process."

Mr Bunjes also made critical comments to some of the ideas presented in the CSC-CCME response. He recalled the change in the Council of Europe policy with regard to positive discrimination. Acknowledging that equality and equal access to services does not necessarily lead to social cohesion, CoE nowadays regards that equal enjoyment of rights is violated if the government does not apply different treatment to people in essentially vulnerable situations. He also said that the understanding of people having multiple cultures is widely acknowledged in the policy of CoE, United Nations and Unesco. Although CSC-CCME response had referred both to positive discrimination and multiple identities, he would have developed those ideas further. He, furthermore, challenged our reflection regarding the decrease of cultural diversity which he saw somewhat contradictory to our other conviction, which he shares, that culture is constantly created afresh.

Finally, Mr Bunjes stated that CoE would carefully study the recommendations contained in the CSC-CCME response, especially with regard to the suggested annual encounter between the Committee of Ministers of CoE and representatives of religious communities.

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<sup>3</sup> This speech will also be published on CEC's website.

## NEXT STEPS

Another concrete example of CoE's interest in the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue is the planned dialogue meeting with representatives of religious communities and organisations related to religion. The first of these meetings will take place on 8 April 2008. Much of its set up - theme, participants, etc. - depends on the outcome of the White Paper. After this meeting CoE will decide whether this kind of meeting will be established as annual meetings, or whether other ways of dialogue with religious communities are needed to be found.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

- CEC's website dedicated to intercultural dialogue:  
<http://www.cec-kek.org/content/intercultural.shtml>
- Current information on the **ongoing consultation process** can be found on the Council of Europe's website for Intercultural Dialogue:  
[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/default\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/default_en.asp)
- Consultation Paper and Questionnaires:
  - **Consultation Document** "Preparing the 'White Paper on intercultural dialogue' of the Council of Europe. Introduction to the consultation process" including the **general questionnaire** (p.16-17):  
[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/Consultation\\_document\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/Consultation_document_EN.pdf)
  - **Questionnaire** addressed to **religious communities**:  
<http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/Questionnaire%20EN%20060307.doc>
  - **Questionnaire** on the role of intercultural dialogue regarding the situation of **immigrants and persons of immigrant background**:  
<http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/Questionnaire%20EN%20260307.doc>
- The **Faro Declaration** (2005):  
[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/CulturalConvention/Source/FARO\\_DECLARATION\\_Definitive\\_Version\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/CulturalConvention/Source/FARO_DECLARATION_Definitive_Version_EN.pdf)



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