

## **IHEU – EHF and the Council of Europe (CofE)**

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Two important meetings organized by the Council of Europe were held recently.

### **1. The Forum “New Multicultural Challenges: how can NGOs play their part?” - Istanbul, 24-25 March 2011**

This forum represented the cornerstone of Turkey’s semester as President of the CofE. The premise of the meeting was that cooperation could promote an understanding of others and lead to a greater sense of security for all. This is crucial for Europe since immigration will continue due to the unstable situation in North Africa and the Middle East. All the more so because, under the pressure of imminent elections, important political leaders have recently declared that multiculturalism is not working and adopted the position that European countries must defend their identities by limiting further immigration. The CofE is that diversity should be seen as a resource and this is where the NGOs, which work directly in the field, can contribute in a concrete way if they adopt appropriate toolkits.

I participated in **Workshop 1 “Freedom of expression and freedom of thought, conscience and religion: the role of civil society in a multicultural society”**. The discussion touched on many issues, but I will cite just one example. The comments of Bülent Senay (President, Diyanet Foundation, The Netherlands) were revealing. He conflated the terms Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, and if he does so, should it come as any surprise that the average citizen might do so as well, giving rise to racist notions? The problem is that, based on this misapprehension and his interpretation of the behaviour of some Westerners, Senay proposes that limitations should be set on the freedom of expression. He was right to condemn Islamophobia, but his proposal cannot be accepted. François Becker made it clear that Islamophobia and anti-Semitism were not analogous phenomena, and I stated that any proposal to limit freedom of speech was incompatible with the basic principles of human rights and in any case would be difficult, if not impossible, to enforce in many countries. A different approach – education to promote acceptance and harmonious co-existence – is necessary.

I came away with the conviction that it would be extremely useful for us to participate in these meetings in the future as they bring together representatives of organizations that are doing important work, and since the CofE directorates sit in on all of the discussions, this forum provides NGOs with a unique opportunity to directly influence European policy in the area of human rights. However, it should be noted that the funds to implement new policies are often allocated directly by the EU so it would be important for us to be active at the EU in Brussels as well.

### **2. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) - Strasbourg, 11-15 April 2011**

IHEU and EHF having a particular interest in the issue of religious intolerance, I attended the session in which the report from the Committee on Culture, Science and Education on

**“The religious dimension of intercultural dialogue”** was presented. The discussion opened with statements delivered by five religious authorities (representing the Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Orthodox and Protestant faiths); their observations were notably devoid of content, as in fact a few MPs noted in their remarks. Michael Connarty, MP (UK), with the assistance of EHF President David Pollock, had made submissions to the Committee at the very last minute which resulted in the rapporteur - the Luxembourg MP Anne Brasseur - adding references throughout to the humanist and non-religious approach to the report. An attempt was made to strike out all references to humanism but was rejected, and with slight amendments the report was approved by the Assembly.

I also felt that it was important to participate in this parliamentary assembly in order to gain some insight into the possible future of NGOs in Europe. There is much cause for concern. The Council of Europe’s budget allocation for NGO activities has been drastically cut for the second time (by 82%!). The Council has also decided to restrict NGO meetings to two of the four annual sessions of the Parliamentary Assembly in Strasbourg (this was the first without NGO meetings) and to limit the facilities (meeting rooms, etc.) that will be made available to NGOs during the remaining two sessions. This will make it more difficult for the NGOs to work and will reduce their contact with the CoE Parliamentary Assembly. A clear understanding of the situation is important because in June elections will be held to select the NGO representatives who will be working in the permanent liaison bureau in Strasbourg.

Other sessions of interest to EHF–IHEU were held that I was not able to participate in, but full reports are available on the Internet ([www.councilofeurope.eu](http://www.councilofeurope.eu), Agenda Doc 12537 and the sittings AA11CR10 to AA11CR18).