

The importance of dialogue serving intercultural and inter-religious communication on freedom of expression

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- **Council of Europe, basic principles**

The Council of Europe is an intergovernmental organisation which aims:

- 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 seek solutions to problems facing European society (discrimination against minorities, xenophobia, intolerance, environmental protection, human cloning, Aids, drugs, organised crime, etc.);
- to help consolidate democratic stability in Europe by backing political, legislative and constitutional reform.

The Council of Europe should not be confused with the European Union. The two organisations are quite distinct. The 15 European Union States, soon to be enlarged to 25, however, are all members of the Council of Europe.

- **Media and Democracy**

Free, independent and pluralistic media, in accordance with Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, are central to the functioning of our democratic societies. The work of the Council of Europe in the media sector is geared towards:

- strengthening freedom of expression and information and the free flow of information and ideas across frontiers;
- developing pan-European policy measures and appropriate legal and other instruments for this purpose;
- formulating appropriate measures to ensure that media law and policy keep pace with technological, economic and regulatory change in the media sector.

- **Freedom of Expression**

The European Declaration on the Freedom of Expression and of Information, adopted by the Committee of Ministers in 1982, expresses the commitment of member States' governments to freedom of expression and information.

Current work is now focused on three major themes:

- media and democracy (monitoring media concentrations, studying the implications of the new communications technologies for human rights and democracy, ensuring a high degree of protection for rights holders, freedom of information, etc.);
- media in a pan-European perspective (working out strategies for deepening commitment to media freedoms, etc.);
- media and human rights (media reporting on legal proceedings, acceptable restrictions to the dissemination of information and opinions in the media about political figures and public officials).

- **The new role and responsibilities of Ministers of Culture**

The Council of Europe has been focusing on intercultural and inter-religious dialogue in the fields of education, culture and youth.

In the field of culture a special programme on “Intercultural dialogue and conflict prevention” has led to the forthcoming adoption of a draft “Declaration in Intercultural Dialogue and Conflict Prevention”. This draft Declaration will be discussed in Croatia in October this year, at a Ministerial Conference of the European Ministers responsible for Cultural Affairs under the title: “The new role and new responsibilities of Ministers of Culture in initiating intercultural dialogue, with due regard for cultural diversity”.

The Declaration will be based on the following principles and shared values:

- respect for cultural identities and expressions of their heritage provided that these comply with the principles upheld by the Council of Europe;
- fair treatment for all cultures and beliefs or convictions which respect the principles of the Council of Europe;
- mutual respect through the recognition of diversity in terms of education on culture, on the philosophy of ideas, religions and spiritual values;
- equality in access, participation and creativity of every sector of society so as to take into account and promote the cultural component and cultural diversity in all their dimensions.

Regarding cultural diversity and dialogue the following principles and methods are underlined:

Cultural diversity

- Principle: it is necessary to distinguish two dimensions within cultural diversity: internal diversity which refers to the respect of cultural rights, tolerance, political and cultural pluralism and the ability to accept otherness, and the external dimension of diversity which identifies itself with the axiom of cultural equivalence. The model of an intercultural society is based on the principle of equality between cultures, the value of cultural heterogeneity as well as the constructive dimension of dialogue. Hence, elements of difference and division must not be viewed as harmful and inimical to the creation of a collective plan requiring differences to be taken into account and otherness to be respected. Cultural diversity is synonymous with exchange and makes it possible to combat the autarky which leads to isolation and xenophobia.

- Method: this principle cannot be applied exclusively in terms of “majority” or “minority”¹, for this pattern singles out cultures and communities, and categorises and stigmatises them in a static position, to the point at which social behaviour and cultural stereotypes are assumed on the basis of groups’ respective status. In contrast, an effort should be made to seek multiple ways of expressing diversity, and to raise citizens’ awareness of the richness of diversity, the more so that globalisation of exchanges can only be conceived of with due respect for diversity.

Intercultural dialogue

- Principle: intercultural dialogue must be encouraged and fostered. It necessarily comes within the framework of the principles of freedom of thought, of conscience, of religion, of expression, of assembly and of association defined in Articles 9, 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and contributes to the fundamental objective of social cohesion.

- Method: the application of this principle cannot be limited to dialogue about convergence; it should include dialogue about what separates cultures and populations. The two aspects of “similarities” and “differences” must not be regarded as alternatives, but more as the two sides of a single coin which should be explored in order to start a true dialogue and to identify solutions so as to transcend apparent or real antagonisms. Communication, information and media must foster intercultural dialogue subject to mutual respect.

- **Public access to Information in a Digital Age**

Freedom of expression has encountered a number of new possibilities and challenges in the digital age. More and more vital information for citizens is published on the internet alone and not available as traditional publications. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) will be focusing on these issues and the Council of Europe is preparing a political message for this, based on the basic values and work of the organisation. So that the citizens in our time of internet and digital information shall be better served, not worse, than in the days of print on paper. The citizens’ right to know, as a *sine qua non* for a pluralistic democratic society, is also the very core of the matter for freedom of expression.

¹ Council of Europe, *In from the margins*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg, 1997, p. 54.