

13 Sep 2004 -11:40

20040913-Speech-OVSE

Speech by Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt at the opening of the OSCZ Conference on Tolerance and the Fight against Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination

Brussels, Heysel, 13 september 2004

Speech by Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt at the opening of the OSCZ Conference on Tolerance and the Fight against Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination Brussels, Heysel, 13 september 2004

Monseigneur, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, It is a privilege for Brussels, multicultural capital of a multicultural country, to host this important conference. And it is a pleasure for me to welcome you. In my opinion Belgium is indeed an excellent venue for discussing the themes of this conference given its location at the crossroads of different cultures. Moreover, of all the cities in the European Union, Brussels - along with Frankfurt and Luxembourg - is home to the highest percentage of foreign nationals. This results in a colourful and diverse society, but of course we also do have our share of frictions and indeed expressions of intolerance. An additional reason why I feel it is appropriate and important for my country to organise this conference today is Belgium's upcoming presidency of the OSCE in 2006. It signals my government's appreciation for the very valuable work of the OSCE, as well as our determination to contribute to the further development of the initiatives taken so far by this organisation. Let me take this opportunity to congratulate the current Chair, Bulgaria, for its successful term of office and for the way it negotiated a consensus about the topics to be discussed here in Brussels. Ladies and gentlemen, Probably many of us had thought that globalisation, television, the Internet and people's increased eagerness to travel would lead to greater tolerance in Europe and the entire world. Unfortunately, we are regularly confronted with just the opposite. We have all witnessed the progress, in many countries, of ultra-right-wing parties which hardly refrain from spreading racist messages. And, even worse, we are witnessing a trend of increased racist violence. So many books and articles have been written about the roots and causes of racism, xenophobia and discrimination. But I am positive that intolerance and racism can be traced back to the simple meaning of the word xenophobia: fear of that which is foreign. The fear that the 'unknown' could take something away from one's own identity and one's possessions: "status anxiety", as Alain de Botton recently called it. Unfortunately it appears that this fear of the unknown cannot be dispelled just by handing out more information. Otherwise, television, the Internet and international travel would have solved the problem long ago. Some people even think that xenophobia cannot be cured at all. I do not agree. I am convinced that governments do have tools to combat intolerance. First of all, there must be a coherent legal framework prohibiting discrimination and racism of whatever sort. Without such a framework and its concrete implementation and enforcement by the courts, a policy promoting greater tolerance cannot succeed. But this is not enough. There are at least two other important keys to tolerance which a government can and must exploit: continued dialogue and education. Ladies and gentlemen, Dialogue. Due to its specific composition, Belgium has a long history of dialogue between communities. This dialogue resulted in a unique federal system aimed at protecting the identity of our three linguistic communities by offering them a very large degree of political, cultural and economic autonomy. Our institutional setup provides for many checks and balances and consultation structures. Of course this does not rule out tensions - as Prime Minister, I still have to smooth differences from time to time - however as a whole, the system has proved efficient. But in this world we can all learn from each other. The protection of cultural freedom and diversity has indeed become a global issue. Belgium is very willing to contribute to this process of sharing experiences. That is why we will organise the Third International Conference on Federalism in March 2005. I am convinced that combining experience and creativity will eventually bring solutions to many existing or emerging conflicts and thus foster greater tolerance. Dialogue is also

necessary with the immigrant community, the " new " Belgians as we call them here. A special body has been established to facilitate dialogue with the substantial muslim community in my country. It will gradually contribute to a process of open discussion on an equal footing about migration, integration and society. Furthermore, for foreigners who take up Belgian nationality, we offer a full set of educational programs, focusing on language and cultural history. Ladies and gentlemen, This brings me to a second tool which governments must use to the fullest to counter xenophobia, namely education. If children and youngsters are taught lessons in which the historic truth is distorted or concealed, if youngsters are raised to look down on others or made to believe that men have more rights than women, then achieving tolerance will be impossible within a society. And yet that is what continues to happen. Up to and including today. It is the government's mission to ensure that this no longer occurs. In the light of recent racist incidents, I have concluded that young people in my country are often not sufficiently aware of the horrible consequences that racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism have had in the past. They are not aware of what people went through because they happened to have a different colour of skin, religion or origin. I am shocked at how quickly this can be forgotten. Two weeks ago, I sat down with the various ministers for education in Belgium to discuss ways to ensure that history is not forgotten and that tolerance and dialogue are placed high up on the education agenda again. Ladies and Gentlemen, The OSCE, the Council of Europe and the European Union can be looked at as projects that in a way originated as a reaction to the intolerance, discrimination and racism that had gripped Europe for so many years. In 1945 all of us in Europe said "Never again!" Sixty years later it is still up to each and every one of us to keep that promise - each and every day. I wish you a highly productive debate in the days ahead. Thank you.