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Living together in 21st-century Europe: follow-up to the report of the Group of Eminent Persons of the Council of Europe

Committee Opinion¹

Committee on Culture, Science and Education

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A. Conclusions of the Committee

1. The Committee on Culture, Science and Education welcomes the report prepared by Mr Latchezar Toshev and adopted by the Political Affairs Committee and shares its general thrust as well as the numerous constructive proposals it contains.

2. It wishes to stress, from the outset, the excellent co-operation which has taken place between Mr Toshev and the committee's rapporteur for opinion, Mr Flego, who was given the opportunity to make an influential contribution to the preparation of the draft recommendation and present his proposals to the Political Affairs Committee, which has taken them into consideration. Therefore, the committee fully supports the draft recommendation, which reflects its concerns, and will not be submitting any amendments.

3. As the committee noted in its recent report on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity, which is a feature of European societies, has in some cases become a source of tension and division which disrupt social cohesion. The committee has promoted a new culture of "living together" based on everyone's equal dignity and wholehearted adherence to the principles of democracy and human rights.

4. The challenge inherent in "living together" consists in building a society in which every individual has not only the right, but also a genuine opportunity, to develop:

- as a person whose dignity and identity, in all their dimensions, are fully recognised and respected by everyone else;
- as a member of a community where everyone plays an active role which is acknowledged and valued by everyone.

5. In this sense, "Combining diversity and freedom in 21st-century Europe" – as the subtitle of the report by the Group of Eminent Persons states – should be understood as a comprehensive, inclusive process aimed at counteracting all the different kinds of marginalisation. "Living together" is the exact opposite of "rejection" and "marginalisation": it involves welcoming diversity and not merely tolerating it as if it were an inevitable burden; it requires a broad-minded outlook and an ability to be open to others without feeling threatened because one's own space is being reduced; it entails solidarity and empowerment of others, in full awareness that this will strengthen the community.

1. to Committee: Reference 3752 of 11 March 2011. Reporting committee: Political Affairs Committee. See [Doc. 12631](#). Opinion approved by the committee on 21 June 2011.



6. The reality is, however, in many cases quite different and, as the report of the Group of Eminent Persons clearly states, “discrimination and intolerance are widespread in Europe today”. Roma, migrants (in the broad sense used in the report, which also includes people of recent migrant background) and national or cultural (including religious) minorities are undoubtedly the most obvious victims of such discrimination and lack of respect.

7. The choice of focusing on them is perfectly understandable, but it is important to discuss and address the problem bearing in mind its broadest dimension: policy design should ideally be all-inclusive even though it may prove necessary, at the policy implementation stage, to give priority to certain particularly vulnerable groups.

8. Policies which deal with “marginalisation” and seek to reinforce “cohesion” within our societies should be multifaceted and consider different political, legal, socio-economic and cultural aspects. Accordingly, it is important to emphasise the priority action that the Council of Europe and national authorities should undertake in order to trigger positive changes in these different spheres. The aims to be achieved may be summarised as follows:

- enhanced political framework: this requires, *inter alia*, strengthening political rights and democratic participation;
- a consolidated legal framework and more effective implementation of human rights standards through administrative practices: this requires, *inter alia*, opposing all forms of discrimination in entitlement to and enjoyment of social, economic and cultural rights;
- improved socio-economic context: this requires, *inter alia*, reducing disparities in the opportunities available to different people and reinforcing social bonds;
- cultural development: this requires, *inter alia*, fostering mutual understanding and dialogue between persons and communities of different cultural backgrounds.

9. These four spheres are, of course, intertwined, and sound measures implemented in one may well support progress in the others. The opposite is also true: a lack of action in one sphere may hamper the effectiveness of measures taken in the others. Therefore, it is crucial to develop holistic strategies. This applies not only to member states, but also to the Council of Europe: the Organisation should not lose the potential for synergies and should co-ordinate the relevant activities in different sectors so that all these support each other and are consistently geared towards common aims.

10. For this reason, although there is a tendency to put the emphasis on the legal dimension (for example, implementation of Council of Europe standards in the human rights field and in particular non-discrimination), which is certainly more prominent in the report, equal attention should be paid to needs in areas targeting social cohesion.

11. With this in mind, the committee wishes to insist on the fundamental importance of cultural development in generating a sound societal environment for “living together” and considers that four areas of intervention are crucial in order to develop a new culture capable of sustaining the “living together” society: education, youth and sport, media and intercultural dialogue.

12. Education (regular formative education as well as lifelong learning, formal as well as informal) is indispensable to individual and societal well-being and cultural development, without which democracy, human rights and the rule of law would lose their foundations and building a “living together” society would be impossible. The ability to use human and social faculties and the capacity to be open to and value diversity are highly dependent on high-quality education. It is therefore necessary to combat the educational and cultural divide in our societies.

13. Therefore, the committee supports the recommendations in the report of the Political Affairs Committee to reinforce the Council of Europe programmes aimed at assisting member states in the framing of sound educational policies and the proper implementation of the right to education with no discrimination, and to further develop the programmes designed to promote education in human rights and democratic citizenship, including education in multiculturalism.

14. In addition, the committee believes that the production of a specially adapted edition of the 2008 White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue for use in primary and secondary schools (as suggested in specific recommendation No. 34 of the Group of Eminent Persons) is a simple but extremely useful measure toward a “living together” society.

15. Enhanced focus on youth and implementation of youth rights are an investment in Europe's cohesion and a better future. As the draft recommendation prepared by the Political Affairs Committee rightly states, youth policies should be at the core of member states' strategies to build "living together" societies.

16. In this respect, the Committee refers to its recent report "Towards a European framework convention on youth rights"² which highlights the need to adopt specific measures to encourage young people's participation in economic and democratic life. It welcomes the reference to sport as a powerful tool to further intercultural dialogue and living together among young people.

17. It is important to insist on the central role of the media in promoting democracy, respect of fundamental rights and the promotion of culture. The Council of Europe should strengthen its relationship with the media world. With this aim in mind, the committee firmly supports the proposal to organise regular encounters involving the main European media networks, with a view to further implementing the Council of Europe's recommendations on training, ethical and content production issues.

18. Building up intercultural dialogue is a clear necessity in our multicultural Europe. The committee strongly supports the proposals to launch a campaign on "living together", to establish pilot projects on intercultural dialogue with schools and higher education institutions and to create a regular process to assess the development of intercultural dialogue in Council of Europe member states, including the preparation of a report and the organisation of a thematic European forum on intercultural dialogue to be held periodically.

19. The committee also notes with great satisfaction the support by the Group of Eminent Persons for the establishment of a stable and recognised platform to improve the Council of Europe's relations with high-level representatives of religious and non-denominational organisations, which echoes the Assembly's requests in Recommendation 1962 (2011) on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue.

20. The committee wishes to stress the importance of recognising that no country is able to face the "living together" challenge alone: despite the many efforts that individual countries may exert, problems will resurface if they are not effectively dealt with by all our countries. Moreover, Europe will probably be unable to respond to the challenge if nothing is done to help developments in neighbouring countries, especially in the Mediterranean Basin.

21. The report by the Group of Eminent Persons is perfectly right when it states that: "living together in Europe requires looking beyond Europe. What happens in parts of the world ..., and especially among Europe's neighbours, is likely to affect all of us, for better and worse. We cannot decide our neighbours' fate, but we must be ready to help them, and also to learn from them, as much as we can."

22. In this respect the committee shares the view that the European Centre for Global Interdependence and Solidarity (North-South Centre) can and should play an important role: it should be given appropriate resources, in order to develop a specific, comprehensive "living together" programme, including educational, intercultural and youth policy dimensions, to support development in non-member countries in the Mediterranean region.

23. To conclude, the committee is convinced that the report of the Political Affairs Committee effectively complements, with very sound recommendations, the suggestions included in the report of the Group of Eminent Persons and focuses on priority initiatives which could become the core elements of a comprehensive action plan towards "living together".

24. The committee is aware that the goal is an ambitious one and probably requires additional resources. However, it strongly believes that in many areas, including education, youth and sport, media and intercultural dialogue, the Council of Europe, because of its chronic lack of resources, is not tapping into all its potential as a leading agency for delivering policy guidance.

25. It is time to stop thinking of the Council of Europe as an old-fashioned, somewhat inefficient organisation – which it definitely is not – and to make use of all its strengths. Hopefully, the report of the Group of Eminent Persons will encourage the adoption of a new perspective from which the real value and indispensable role of the Council of Europe will appear more clearly. Investing in the Council of Europe is worthwhile and the committee hopes that the Committee of Ministers will recognise this and act accordingly.

2. [Doc. 12629](#).