

Counsellor Kirsti Westphalen's presentation

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since a few years there has been a growing realization within the EU that we, as the EU and as Member States have to take measures to improve our understanding of political discourse amongst the Muslim Ummah, particularly of European Muslims.

Last December the European Union adopted a Strategy for combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism. I find it personally unfortunate that it is only the threat of terrorism which makes the governments take this challenge seriously. Any way, a well drafted strategy has now taken up issues which are central as we try and map out a way from the polarized atmosphere of today. The strategy underlines the obligation of the EU Member States to create national conditions which foster integration, harmonious coexistence, mutual respect and equality between different religious and ethnic groups. It underlines the necessity to fight discrimination and the fact that migrant communities be isolated from the core population. It underscores the necessity to avoid generalizations and labeling. And with regard to the Muslim population it underlines the obvious, that is, that only a small part of European Muslims are (as Muslims elsewhere) such radicals which would be prepared to use violence as a means to change the society.

The strategy is based on the idea that a reduction in radicalization of the Muslim population could be achieved by a dialogue between the EU authorities and moderate Muslims both nationally as well as internationally. These are bold and worthy principles and their application becomes all the more necessary in the current political atmosphere of distrust. The question is how?

In Europe as well as here in Finland, we should take upon us to initiate a true dialogue between the authorities and the Muslim community. It is commendable that the Muslim community here in Finland is currently trying to organize itself as a dialogue partner. We, the authorities as well as the Muslim community should be prepared to examine all such issues which are mutually perceived to be of concern. It is time to move from talk to action.

Other European countries, the UK, Germany, France, Austria and many others have utilized different models of dialogue. We should study them and try work on a model which would suit us and our conditions. I would also like to underline that the Muslim community of Finland (in all of its diversity) has a responsibility to make clear within their own community, as well as to the majority population that extremism has no place amongst their ranks. Here in Finland we are just one generation behind the European development of having radicalized Muslim segments in our population. We are still at a phase of marginalization and displacement. But if nothing is done about it, we are sure to follow the same path of aggravated problems of integration and identity that the rest of Europe is currently suffering.

The cure for this ailment is to build every day security for all minorities. With this I mean

and investment in work and livelihood, education and health for all without discrimination. Being able to express yourself, in a sufficient manner, in the language of the country is an absolute necessity. This requires a commitment from the authorities as well as from the concerned person. A part of this over all commitment should also be the reinforcement of the original identity of the migrant. To be able to construct a new identity you need a solid foundation of knowing who you are and that the heritage of your forefathers is a worthy one.

European Imams and Muslim educators are facing a challenge to offer young people knowledge of Islam by educated instructors, and a community that the young can identify with. The society has to offer them the opportunity to study Islam and to live as Muslims a balanced and a respected life as part of the wider community. It is important that we try to encourage such interpretations of Islam where Islam can live side by side with other religions, respecting the foundation of a democratic society and human rights. Conditions have to be created for the evolution of a European Islam.

What Europe really needs is a new peace of Westhalia some 350 years after the original one which ended European Christian religious wars and gave rise to the new nation state. In a globalized world nation states have not ceased to exist but have changed their appearance, physical borders no longer hinder communication and interaction and our identities are being renegotiated. In this globalised Europe there should be a space for all religions Catholic, Protestant, Muslim or Jewish who share the core principles of being European; equality, rule of law, justice for all, as well as respect and tolerance for all.