



WORKING SESSIONS - DAY ONE

The morning of the 1st day of the governmental part of the OSCE conference started by an address by the President of Romania, Mr. Traian Basescu, President Basescu spoke nice words about all the measures Romania is taking to fight the discrimination of Roma, which was not surprising since he was involved in a scandal recently for calling a journalist 'a dirty gypsy'. We will see if this is the usual lip service being paid or a real attempt to rectify his bad remark and finally take real action against the -partly state organized and sanctioned- discrimination of Roma in his country. Don't hold your breath, a president who in the same speech says that democracy is a 'political regime' still has a whole lot to learn.

Following were speeches given by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel and Prince Hassan of Jordania. Prince Hassan talked mainly about his own region, the middle east, the plight of Muslims, and the problems in Iraq. This annoyed congressman Eric Cantor somewhat. The tone was set for a full-out screaming fit between the U.S. and Egypt later in the day. Elie Wiesel (by video message) warned against neo-nazi and racist groups, openly holding public meetings and doing their 'activities' in Europe. He also stressed that of the three 'illnesses' of the 20th century, nazims and communism and antisemitism, antisemitism was the only one still around.



After this Magda Matache (NGO Romani CRISS) presented some highlights from the consolidated recommendations (179 in total) on behalf of the NGOs.

She closed her speech by saying 'I stand here before you and maybe I should identify as a dirty gypsy, like the Romanian president said recently, but no, I stand here as a proud Roma woman'. Which made the smile on the face of President Basescu disappear real fast. Oops.

More on this days sessions later. Since our news team is understaffed (2), underpaid, overworked, suffering from heatstroke and non-existing or crappy internet connections and above all extremely tired we will have 'reconvene' later.

The first working session of the day was on combating antisemitism. As was to be expected, it became clear that despite OSCE commitments manifestations of antisemitism in the OSCE region, including hate crime against Jews, were still on the rise. Several speakers pledged their support for the special OSCE representative on antisemitism, Professor Gert Weisskirchen. A number of Jewish NGOs made excellent contributions although some were a bit heavy-handed in driving the message home; 'antisemitism is the oldest and most vicious of all forms of racism', seemingly afraid that somebody would not have noticed this. Later in the session ambassador Julie Finley, the U.S. chief of mission to the OSCE blew her top when the Egyptian spokesperson (Egypt is one of the OSCE Mediterranean partners for cooperation who almost never show up during conferences) started to make flippant -and later antisemitic- remarks. The vicious and counterproductive rant of



Ambassador Finley is described in this day's editorial.

Strangely enough, Finley's attack on the fact that the conference also dealt with other forms of discrimination, 'Let's all go back to Vienna and work on antisemitism, the rest of the issues can take care of themselves', is not exactly U.S. policy. At the contrary. U.S. delegation officials have, during the last five years, always worked for including other forms of discrimination. During the OSCE parliamentary assembly 2003 in Rotterdam, at an NGO side event organized by Magenta Foundation and CIDI (Netherlands) the previous U.S. Ambassador to the OSCE, Mr. Stephan Minikes stated: "You NGOs better make sure to include all forms of racism in your advocacy since this is the only way to mainstream and keep antisemitism firmly on the agenda". Another U.S. delegation member present at the side event, congressman Chris Smith, firmly agreed. Probably he and some others in the U.S. delegation are suffering from a bout of amnesia because they made it clear that 'the other issues' really take second place to antisemitism. Which is a real disservice, not only towards 'the other issues' but also towards the Jewish NGOs since it creates, as the hierarchy of suffering always does, resentment. What's more, during the closing session of the conference Chris Smith himself made a statement that reversed his 2003 position.

The session on combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims was next. Since the U.S. delegation was still reeling out in the corridor because of the Finley situation, the only U.S. delegate sitting in the plenary was Imam Talal Eid, who had the good sense of just not replying when the Egyptian ambassador, not satisfied with his time allotment during his attack on Finley, simply started a new one. Although moderator Ambassador Orhun succeeded in leading the meeting in a productive manner, many were out in the corridors discussing the scandal or were just totally distracted. Issues talked about were amongst others: hate crimes against Muslims and mosques, discriminatory and negative (political) rhetoric, the image of Muslims in the media, the Muslims=Terrorists equation.

The day ended as per usual with lots of receptions.

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