Welcoming Address

Workshop on

RESPECT AND TOLERANCE IN EUROPE: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

****

by Andreas Theophanous
Professor of Political Economy
Director of the Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs
University of Nicosia
E-mail: theophanous.a@unic.ac.cy

****

01 July, 2011
University of Nicosia

Welcoming Address

On behalf of the Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs I would like to welcome all of you to this timely event. Indeed, the issue of tolerance and respect for diversity is an integral part of the European value system. Yet we have been witnessing tensions in several European countries resulting from the profound changes that are taking place around us.

It is thus important to understand what has gone wrong which has led several societies to witnessing elements of xenophobia. My premise is that when the rules of the game are fair and well structured more often than not we have positive outcomes. On the other hand when there is lack of a common understanding and vision as well as grey areas, problems are likely to arise. In this regard it is important to comprehend what led Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister Cameron to recently declare that multiculturalism has failed.

My understanding is that in societies which have a sustained inflow of people from other countries and cultures at some point in time tensions may be created for various reasons. While minorities want and deserve to be respected at the same time the mainstream position is that minorities should try to integrate and also respect the value system of the host country. It is also a question of having to strike an effective balance between rights and obligations.

Indeed, there are many issues that need specific attention; issues that are also discussed by this workshop's participants. For example, what is the state's role in eliminating or at least controlling any potential problems involving lack of respect or intolerance? On the other hand, what should minorities do (or not do) to ameliorate any potential disagreements or problems within the society they try to become part of. Similarly, how is xenophobia eliminated within the majority group? What is the state's role in this process or that of the education system?

Cyprus is today facing today several serious challenges. It is striving to achieve reunification of the country which is *de facto* divided since 1974. Division entails several dimensions, including foreign occupation. In addition to that, the issue of Turkish settlers raises major questions. Of course it must be made clear that it is not an issue of illegal immigration, but a political issue as it is changing the demographic structure of the island and the balance between the minority and majority communities. In the northern occupied part of Cyprus already the settlers are now the majority group, a predicament that has raised deep concerns even among the Turkish Cypriots. Obviously, this has clearly a security dimension. Inevitably this has led to a very difficult political climate.

By extension this situation influences perceptions on the issue of the increasing number of illegal immigrants and asylum seekers in the government controlled areas – given that most of them come through the occupied part of Cyprus.

It is under these circumstances that efforts to address issues of xenophobia promote peaceful coexistence and creativity are under way in Cyprus. Eventually whether it is Cyprus or any other country, what is of great importance is to have a particular value system and a political structure which deals with all relevant issues and is capable of promoting integration. With these few thoughts in mind I wish you a successful and creative working day. Thank you very much.