

Counter violent extremism through inclusion, education and respect, says EP Conference

By Beatrice Basaldella for Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (29.04.2015) - The Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats (S&D Group) organised a conference on 21st April at the European Parliament on countering violent extremism. Contributions included many speakers from European institutions, academics, journalists and various associations, all united around one common message: it is only through the promotion of human rights, integration and education that violent extremism can be fought in Europe.

Gianni Pittella, the President of the S&D Group, appealed for an immediate and comprehensive response to extremism, adding that Europe's security cannot be achieved by just building a wall across the Mediterranean. Bringing people together around democratic values, he said, must be at the centre of a strategic response to violent extremism. Tanja Fajon, Vice-president of S&D Group, said that the root causes of extremism, such as religious intolerance, lack of political freedoms and violations of human rights, likewise need to be addressed. "Europe has to demonstrate emotional intelligence and try to understand why people embrace extremist ideologies," she said. Indeed, Professor Preben Bertelsen of Aarhus University in Denmark underlined that harsh exclusionary measures implemented by some Member States to combat illegal activism can backfire into further radicalisation.

Stavros Lambrinidis, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, echoed this point by summarising ten principles and values which should inspire actions to fight extremism. "Violence can never be justified," he stated, and it must be condemned, especially by religious and political leaders. Even still, education, open societies and freedom of speech must be promoted in each state in its own way. Military actions aimed at fighting terrorism must be used only as a last resort and in full respect of human rights. "Human rights have always been the universal language against those who want to divide us," he said. This is "a battle within cultures, not against cultures," commented Lambrinidis.

Lambrinidis' address introduced one of the main topics for debate: Why are European citizens choosing to take up arms to fight for the so-called Islamic State? Peter R. Neumann, Director of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalism (www.icsr.info), described what motivates these foreign fighters. Many feel that they have no stake in EU society. The importance of peer relations in the radicalisation and recruitment processes should also be noted, he said. This is accentuated through the use of social media.

Latifa Ibn Ziaten works with youth through an association she created in 2012 after her son Imad was killed in Toulouse. Everyone can play an active role in any European society, she stressed, including Muslims. But we must listen to Muslim youth, provide support for difficult family situations, school assistance and even psychological help, when needed. A Belgian woman, Hayat Khyare, spoke about discriminatory laws which divide people, such as the prohibition to wear the headscarf, which led her sister to conclude that she had no place in European society. The sister left her home in Belgium to go fight with Da'ish in the Middle East.

The event also accentuated the important role of women and mothers in preventing the recruitment of their sons and daughters for terrorism. Educative and financial tools must be provided and promoted to empower youth, combat alienation, marginalisation and social exclusion, said Malika Hamidi of the EU Muslim Network.

"Youths need the hope that they can succeed and politicians have the responsibility to provide them the opportunities in order to do so... independently from their background everyone can have a place in European society," commented Alfzal Khan, the Muslim MEP representing North West England. The central message of the conference was clear: exclusion leads to radicalisation, illegal activities and extremist positions. It is only through education, integration, protection of freedom of religion or belief and the respect of human rights that we can fight

extremism and not through further violence.