

Madam Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen!

First, let me thank you for the invitation, and the opportunity to be here, and speak in front of you today. It is a great honour, and I sincerely hope that the few things I am going to speak about can contribute to your discussions during the session.

For the past 20 years I have been working with people who left their homes and moved to another country to start a new life there. Some of them were forced to leave, some came of their own will. Some came from a neighbouring country, some from thousands of kilometres away. Some were poor, some better off, some were successful, others not. Some stayed and many moved on. We called them foreigners, refugees, immigrants, aliens or strangers.

Since the very beginning I have been thinking about why our attitudes toward others who are different from us, can be so different. There are people who have absolutely no problem with living or working together with others from a different national, ethnic or religious background. And there are people who feel comfortable only among the members of their own small communities. And there are differences across countries as well: some seem to be more open and receptive towards strangers and foreigners, others are less so. I also learned, that life is usually better and people are happier in those cases when there is trust and openness between different communities. If there is fear, suspicion, intolerance and hatred, everybody suffers – not only the targeted minorities. Fear is the biggest enemy of freedom.

Recently there has been much talk about immigration in Europe. People are increasingly anxious about the future of their communities, and in several countries politicians take advantage of this: rather than concentrating on solving the problems caused by the sudden arrival of many immigrants or the problems caused by the failed integration of some communities, they themselves fuel the fear and anxiety, often scapegoating whole ethnic or religious minority groups.

Researchers have been thinking about the possible reasons for people's negative attitudes toward immigrants and minorities.

Sometimes we talk about personal or broader, group or community-level psychological factors. Others emphasize the sociological or cultural aspects behind negative inter-group attitudes.

And we should talk about the situation what we call 'moral panic'. It happens when a particular and isolated social problem is presented as a general and universal threat to our societies. Very often it is generated by political groups or the media with the aim of gaining public support to grasp or retain power.

A recent study on a Eurobarometer survey concludes on a relatively positive tone:

The majority of Europeans have direct contact with or regular interaction with non-EU immigrants and quite a few of them have close ties with them. Furthermore, Europeans are broadly tolerant and accepting of immigrants and positively inclined towards initiatives aiming at ensuring their successful integration.

However if we look at the differences across countries we find interesting data: there are countries where two third or even three quarter of the respondents said that they would feel uncomfortable with social relations with immigrants, whereas in others this proportion is less than ten percent.

Another question asks about the perceived impact of immigrants on society. There are countries where less than a quarter of the people see it positive, and there are others where the overwhelming majority – over three quarters are satisfied with it.

There is an interesting tendency in the data: the more often people encounter immigrants (or the more immigrants there are in their countries) the less likely that they will maintain negative attitudes toward them. I'll get back to this a little later.

Most of these questions are good enough tools to draw conclusions based on the answers given to them, however there are mistakes we can easily make:

We tend to see intolerance, xenophobia and racism in attitudes and reactions that are not perceived as such by the respondents themselves. Being labelled as racist for simply making a critical remark or a less positive observation about complex social facts can be extremely frustrating. People can feel great injustice, and often these experiences make them sympathize with those who forge political capital from other people's fear and discontent.

Meeting strangers is not always a pleasant experience. We often feel uncomfortable about these encounters. Feeling of suspicion, even fear about others is part of our human existence. But we shouldn't stop here. We

shouldn't let fear and anxiety dominate our lives, we shouldn't build our communities on excluding and keeping away others simply because we don't know them. Fear of an imagined enemy can bring people together, but it is never enough to keep a community integrated for long.

When talking about the integration of our societies we often refer to a popular social-psychological theory what we usually call the contact theory or contact hypothesis. At first it may seem a very simple one: interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce conflicts between members of a majority and minority group. What is less well known however, that it doesn't happen automatically when people meet. Only if certain conditions are met.

The first is that both groups should have similar social and economic status.

Secondly they should work for the same goals.

The third condition is intergroup cooperation – they should work for their goals together, without competition.

And only then comes personal interaction – that members of the groups should physically meet and interact with each other.

And lastly – and probably most importantly in this room – there is the support of the authorities and the legal and political system what is needed. Both groups should feel that the government, the public administration, the law, the police, the education, health and economic institutions are equally theirs – they are protected, represented and supported in their common endeavours.

This condition is probably the most difficult to meet, though this is the field in which the people in this room may have the greatest expertise and experience. It needs wisdom, knowledge and good strategic skills to govern a community with the above considerations in mind. A community in which everybody feels at home, everybody feels represented and protected – regardless their origin, colour, language, religion or sex. With this I wish you all success in your genuine effort to reduce xenophobia, racism and intolerance in your countries and regions, and make them a better place for all to live in.

Thank you for your attention!