



CULTURES & CIVILISATIONS DIALOGUE

“Asian Lecture Tour”



Mobility, Diversity and Social Cohesion: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract:

Diversity in society can be measured along several demographic demarcation lines – including gender, age, race, religion and ethnicity. While the principles of human dignity, equality and anti-discrimination have been accepted as essential by all member nations of the UN, **these different demographic groups have different positions and unequal opportunities in society.**

In the 20th century growing intra-regional and inter-regional mobility, especially by labor migrants but also for humanitarian and other reasons, has resulted in the religious and ethnic diversity of most societies increasing at a particularly fast rate. This has posed some challenges to the cohesion of societies – particularly in societies, which traditionally have been rather homogeneous and therefore have little experience with visible diversity among the population. At a more extreme level, managing this “new” diversity in societies experiencing heightened tensions or outright violent conflict necessitates particular attention. Recent examples of all types of challenges can be found both in Europe and Asia.

In Europe, the strong commitment to equality and diversity as a positive value has not resulted in the eradication of discrimination in either the public or the private sectors, and the disadvantaged position of migrants and minorities continues to be a major concern. Further complicating this, the general climate since 9/11 has changed and increasingly there are signs that racism and xenophobia, especially in the form of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, are reemerging with new vigor.

The post 9/11 climate arguably shows similar trends in Asia. Hostility between certain communities in Asia has been a reality for many years, and despite the adherence by most Asian countries to the International Charter for Human Rights, there remains a lot to be done – both at a policy level and at the level of civil society – to actively address these issues.

There is recognition that the cohesion of an increasingly diverse society is a complex matter and the content of proposed policies, purportedly designed to facilitate integration of newcomers into host societies, varies among both Asian and European countries. Further, there has also been a recognition that “incentives” need to be put in place, in order to convince civil society and business actors to embrace diversity as an asset.

What are the various models of anti-discrimination legislation and policies that have been put in place by governments? Can countries come to a consensus in dealing with the various manifestations of racism and xenophobia? How can awareness of the benefits and challenges of diversity be raised at the level of the political leadership?

Profile of Speaker:



Ilze Brands Kehris is since 2002 the Director of the independent non-governmental organization the Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (www.humanrights.org.lv) in Riga, Latvia, where she has also previously worked as a researcher and policy analyst. Her main research interests are minority rights, citizenship, anti-discrimination, racism, xenophobia and intolerance and the processes of democratization in post-socialist societies, although the institution also researches and monitors legislation and situation in closed institutions like prisons, mental health institutions, illegal migrant camps and police detention cells (and other issues relating to law enforcement). Ilze Brands Kehris is since June 2004 the Vice-chair of the Management Board of the European Union Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia. In January 2006 she became one of the ten members of the European Commission's expert High Level Group for the social and labour market integration of ethnic minorities, formed by the initiative of Commissioner Spidla's under the Directorate General of Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. In June 2006 she became a member of Council of Europe's Advisory Committee to the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (as independent expert from Latvia), and was also elected Vice-Chair of that body.

About the Asia-Europe Foundation Cultures & Civilisations Dialogue Programme

Notions of a “**Clash of Civilisations**” and a **deep cultural divide** have entered the lexicon of academic and public discourse. One of the most often cited work is Samuel Huntington's 1993 thesis on how today's battle lines will be made along “the fault lines of civilisations” and no longer those of economics or ideology.

A counter-movement is developing towards greater understanding, to stem the so-called “rising tide” of intolerance and distrust. The most important argument arising from this examination of cultures and civilisations is that **conflict need not be inevitable**. The Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF) strives to be part of this effort.

At the 4th Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) Summit in Copenhagen (2002), the Chairman's statement stressed the need to promote “unity in diversity” among the various cultures represented among the 38 ASEM countries. ASEF was asked to accompany this initiative through its own “Civil Society” architecture in Asia and Europe.

In consonance with this enterprise, **the philosophy of ASEF's Cultures & Civilisations Dialogue** programme emanates from the following as the premise for dialogue: **respect for the equal dignity of all civilisations; conviction that cultural diversity is an asset, not a liability; and accountability for the impact of prejudice on present and future generations.**

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