



REPUBLIC OF CROATIA
Ombudsman

**HIGH LEVEL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE SPEAKER OF CROATIAN PARLIAMENT**

RECLAIMING HUMAN RIGHTS IN EUROPE: HOW TO ENHANCE THE DEMOCRATIC SPACE?

**Counter-terrorism - Freedom of expression – Living together
Zagreb, 11-12 May 2017**

Human rights and equality are being challenged in wider Europe, confronted with reactions to the continuing mass migration flows, rise of extremism and intolerance, security concerns, as well as the ongoing impact of austerity measures, resulting in growing inequalities which contribute to hardship and further radicalisation.

Horrific terrorist acts in Europe have affected the everyday lives of many. The approach set in the aftermaths of those tragic events, and in the name of security, threatens core European values. The need for security should not imply a deterioration of commitment to these values - to the contrary, respect for human rights, equality and the rule of law, must be the bedrock of the fight against terrorism in democratic societies.

That implies that various and diverse critical voices must be heard. However, it is nevertheless necessary to prevent, or even sanction all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify hatred based on intolerance. Yet, the line between freedom of expression and hate speech is sometimes blurred. In addition, specific challenges posed by digital media remain to be addressed in an effective way. At the same time, violence against journalists and interference with their rights remains to be an issue.

Not surprisingly, living together is one of the greatest challenges in today's Europe. Successful integration of people of migrant origin and more recent migrants and refugees, as well as other socially excluded minorities, like Roma, is still to be achieved. How we go about achieving integration and equality, while respecting diversity in our societies should be based on values Europe is built upon. More importantly, living together promotes resilience to extremist ideologies and provides a counter narrative to hate.

In this respect, human rights defenders, including national human rights institutions, ombudsmen and equality bodies, play a crucial role in preserving democracy and the rule of law by bringing the voices of right-holders, especially the most vulnerable in societies. The 25th anniversary of the Ombudsman institution in the Republic of Croatia is an opportunity to discuss these interrelated issues as well as to reaffirm the importance of human rights in enhancing the democratic space.