European Commission against Racism and Intolerance: Growing Emphasis on Internet Racism in New Country Reports

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On 15 June 2010, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) released its latest reports on France, Georgia, Poland and "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (fYROM), adopted in the fourth round of its monitoring of the laws, policies and practices to combat racism in the Member States of the Council of Europe (for commentary on earlier reports, see IRIS 2010-4: 1/3, IRIS 2009-10: 0/109, IRIS 2009-8: 5/4, IRIS 2009-5: 4/4, IRIS 2008-4: 6/5, IRIS 2006-6: 4/4 and IRIS 2005-7: 3/2).

The main recommendations dealing with the (audiovisual) media and/or the Internet in these reports can be grouped into three rough categories. The first category concerns the harmful effects of stereotypes propagated by the media (Reports on the fYROM (para. 73 and 74) and Georgia (para. 56)). The overall tenor of ECRI's various recommendations flowing from this focus is that States authorities should encourage and actively support measures aimed at promoting possible roles for the media in fostering "interethnic cohesion" (Report on fYROM, para. 74) or, generally, "reconciliation", "mutual trust", "mutual understanding", "tolerance" and "peaceful co-existence" among different groups in society (Report on Georgia, para. 56).

The second main category of recommendations focuses on racism disseminated via the Internet. Thus, in its Report on Poland, ECRI calls for "an increase in law-enforcement resources for the fight against racism on the Internet" (para. 103). Similarly, in its Report on France, ECRI "strongly recommends" that the French authorities "pursue and reinforce their efforts to combat forms of racist expression propagated via the Internet", including by publicising "the ban on the use of statements inciting to racial hatred" which are disseminated online and the possibility of reporting violations of the ban (para. 83). In respect of the fYROM, ECRI recommends increased vigilance by the authorities in tackling the problem and the establishment of a "surveillance system, in co-operation with access providers and without interfering in the latter's independence" to monitor the situation (para. 76). The Report on France also focuses on the need to raise media awareness of the need for them to prevent the content of discussion boards hosted on their Internet sites from creating "an atmosphere of hostility towards and rejection of members of minority groups" (para. 79).

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The third category of recommendations has a catch-all character. It comprises a number of now-familiar calls by ECRI on States authorities, e.g. to denounce racist expressions by public figures and to initiate legal proceedings against offenders, as appropriate (Report on fYROM, para. 72) and to raise awareness among media professionals about the need to report relevantly and sensitively on (potential) ethnic dimensions to criminal cases and other stories (Report on Poland, para. 105). A final - more specific - recommendation falling in this category, is that the National Broadcasting Council of Poland should "show increased vigilance concerning racism within its field of competence", including by raising public awareness about the existence of the relevant complaints mechanism (ibid., para. 97).

ECRI Reports on Georgia, Poland and "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (fourth monitoring cycle), all adopted on 28 April 2010 and ECRI Report on France (fourth monitoring cycle), adopted on 29 April 2010; all published on 15 June 2010

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