

# Organized Tolerance



**TALKING TOLERANCE:** The European Council on Tolerance and Reconciliation holds its inaugural meeting in Paris in early October

COURTESY ECTR

**Banking on the prominence and prestige of its members, the newly-established European Council of Tolerance and Reconciliation promises to lead the struggle against bigotry and intolerance in Europe**

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**I**N THE SHADOW OF INCREASING interracial and interethnic violence across Europe, and under the threat of it escalating further due to the impending world financial crisis, the newly-established European Council on Tolerance and Reconciliation (ECTR) held its inaugural meeting in Paris, in early October.

The Council is co-chaired by Aleksander Kwasniewski, who was president of Poland from 1995 to 2005 and wealthy Russian businessman Moshe Kantor, the president of the European Jewish Congress (EJC), who initiated the new non-governmental organization.

In a press conference to mark the inauguration in Paris, in early October, Kantor declared, "Unfortunately, there is no pill we can take so we'll all wake up with full toler-

ance for our neighbors. There is no vaccination against intolerance."

Kantor, the major funder of the ECTR, warned that he sees a "strong parallel between the period leading up to the Holocaust and the world situation today. The world was criminally intolerant then, and we will not allow that to happen today. We will carry this fight to the streets of Europe and demand that Europe's politicians work together to fight against intolerance and not stand idly by."

Members present at the council's inaugural session, convened at the Académie Diplomatique Internationale building near the Champs-Élysées on the same day as the press conference, included, in addition to Kwasniewski and Kantor, former Slovenian president Milan Kucan, former Albanian president Alfred Moisiu, and former Swedish prime minister Goran Persson and

initiator of the International Forum on the Holocaust; and Vilma Trajkovska, president of the Boris Trajkovski Foundation in Macedonia. Other prominent founding members include former Spanish prime minister Jose Maria Aznar, former Czech Republic president Václav Havel, and former Latvian president Vaira Vike-Freiberga.

Kwasniewski emphasized at the press conference that the ECTR is a non-governmental organization and that the members were chosen for their prominence in the European arena and their contributions to combating intolerance. With the exception of Kantor, who has never run for national office, all are former politicians.

"The power of the council," said Kwasniewski, "will come from the prestige of its members and from its diversity and inclusiveness. I am sure that the opinion of such a group of people will mean a lot in

Europe. The fact that we are not current politicians and not currently running for office adds to its moral and public authority."

In November, the council will be sponsoring a two-day program at the European parliament in Brussels, marking the 70th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the November 1938 pogrom in Germany in which 92 Jews were murdered and between 25,000 and 30,000 were arrested and deported to concentration camps; some 200 synagogues were destroyed and tens of thousands of Jewish businesses and homes ransacked.

"The European Parliament must be at the forefront of the battle against racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism," Kantor declared at the press conference. "There has been an increasing banalization of the Holocaust, a rewriting of history and tolerance for Holocaust denial – we will sponsor this important event to make sure that the world continues to learn the lessons of the Holocaust, and that countries that have shirked their responsibility prosecute Nazi criminals. Whoever says that Europe has learned all the lessons of the darkest hours isn't seeing reality," he said.

The ECTR will also be awarding an annual Medal of Tolerance; the first such decoration will be awarded to King Juan Carlos I of Spain, in "recognition of his lifetime achievements in promoting tolerance and democracy." The date of the awards ceremony has yet to be determined.

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*– former Polish president Aleksander Kwasniewski*

Since the ECTR is still in its founding stages, Kwasniewski acknowledged, it does not yet have other concrete programs lined up. "We will be considering many initiatives to advance concrete, political, cultural and education initiatives to create a more tolerant Europe," he promised. These initiatives include a plan to introduce a European Framework Convention on Tolerance and to introduce anti-racist laws and practices to individual states and to the European Parliament. The council also intends to produce a "Whitebook" on tolerance, which will provide outlines of effective principles and tactics employed to combat intolerance.

Acknowledging the absence of representatives from states such as Serbia and Kosovo, with their recent past that includes ethnic cleansing and severe human rights abuses, Kwasniewski also said, "On the other hand, we do have some countries from the former Yugoslavia. And our members from the Balkans have seen intolerance up close and recently, so we believe that their experience will be invaluable."

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*– European Jewish Congress President Moshe Kantor*

**A**LTHOUGH KANTOR IS A political ally of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, he invited Kwasniewski, whom Putin has publicly criticized, to head the council. Kwasniewski is known for his alliances with the West (he guided Poland's joining NATO in 1999) and was one of the negotiators of the Ukrainian "Orange Revolution" that led to its independence.

During the working sessions, the press conference and internal meetings, there was no overt evidence of any political or personal tension between Kantor and Kwasniewski. But differences in styles and emphases were

evident in their responses to questions during the press conference.

When asked about the ECTR's position on nuclearization of Iran and North Korea, Kwasniewski stated that "The Council is not prepared to be a politicized body." He then added, "Everything the President of Iran said at the United Nations General Assembly was wrong and immoral. But what bothers me more is that he received applause after his comments. However, in both the United States and Russia, the question of Iran is guided by internal considerations and domestic politics. And that is wrong, the question of diplomacy and sanctions should

not be dictated by internal considerations."

Kantor, who also set up and finances the Luxembourg Forum, which he referred to as a panel of "leading world experts on nuclearization," followed up by saying, "We are of the opinion that Iran already has an experimental warhead and has the means of delivering it. And countries like the United States, Germany and Belarus are guilty of de facto participation in this nuclear program,

because they have sold them equipment and technology that have allowed them to progress this far.

"This threat, which is particularly dangerous to Russia, Europe and Israel, is undervalued. Sanctions are not effective and the world is not paying attention. Iran must know that the world will act to protect itself." He added, "I believe that Israel is waiting for the U.S. elections on November 4 and that, after that, we will see change and a new, stronger, response." He refused to elaborate.

Asked about the integration of Muslims and Arabs into European countries, Kwasniewski told the press, "Integration will be one of our most important focuses. But both sides must participate in this process. The host country must learn to embrace multiculturalism. But the immigrants must realize that they must learn the language of the host country and respect its customs."

And Kantor added, somewhat obliquely, "We want to be precise and objective. Let's not forget the Jewish refugees from Arab countries. So there must be a balanced decision between all peoples."

With regard to the current economic crisis, Kwasniewski acknowledged that the situation may "create an atmosphere of intolerance, making our work even more urgent." And Kantor continued, "The world always thinks that the Jews are greedy and so there will be people who will blame the Jews for this world crisis. But the Jews will be assertive this time. Europe will not be a slave to stereotypes that have existed, and continue to exist, for generations." ●