

# **10 YEARS OF THE ANTI-DISCRIMINATION ACT IN CROATIA**

## **WELCOME AND OPENING PANEL SESSION**

**Anne Gaspard, Equinet Executive Director**

**25 April 2019, House Europe Zagreb**

Thank you for inviting Equinet (the European Network of Equality Bodies) to be part of this conference marking 10 years of the Anti-Discrimination Act in Croatia. It is an honour for us to be with you today to celebrate this important milestone in your work, and for me personally just like I had the privilege to be there 10 years ago. Pleased to join discussions today to reflect on your achievements, progress and challenges and to support the continuation of your key mission promoting equality, assisting people to claim their rights, and driving change in society. My words of welcome will focus on the significant engagement and valuable contribution of the Croatian institutions to the European level work. And whilst noting that your international mark goes well beyond at various levels, also with the Council of Europe (ECRI), at UN level and with other international platforms and sister networks, I will focus on the work of Equinet which has the privilege to be chaired by Croatian Deputy Ombudswoman TSE since 2017. A great leadership that we want to acknowledge with pride and appreciation.

Equinet is the European Network of Equality bodies, established 11 years ago – at similar times to the introduction of your AD Act. Equinet brings together 49 organisations from 36 European countries – which as independent statutory institutions and according to EU equal treatment legislation are empowered to challenge discrimination across the range of grounds, including age, disability, gender, race or ethnic origin, religion or belief and sexual orientation. (grounds covered by the EU Directives)

Our network facilitates cooperation, capacity building and peer support for national equality bodies in the implementation of their functions. It supports them to be independent and effective catalysts for more equal societies; and to contribute *their expertise and learning* to equality policy and law at European level. We do this through working groups, seminars, trainings and reports, ...

From the very early days of Equinet, and immediately after the introduction of the Anti-Discrimination Act in Croatia, it has been a true asset for our Network to welcome within its membership the Office of the Ombudswoman, followed by the Ombudsperson for Gender Equality and the Ombudswoman for persons with Disabilities. *(see Equinet Brochure for wider membership across Europe)*

Your long-standing engagement in Equinet cooperation with peer equality bodies – be it at strategic Board leadership level (with Ombudswoman’s office since 2011), or for your expert staff participating substantially as you do in thematic Working Groups, in Equinet trainings and seminars – all has been of added-value to Equinet work, has supported other equality bodies and contributed to the European Equality agenda. Just like we trust this cooperation has and will continue to bring an effective support to your institutions and staff in your national and local work.

*Over the years, we had the pleasure of having few Equinet meetings and Seminars hosted by your institutions in Zagreb. For example a successful seminar in 2017 focused on Discrimination and Intellectual Disabilities, co-organised with Ombudswoman for persons with Disabilities. This alongside valued engagement on gender equality work, VAW or tackling the gender pay gap, communicating equality and human rights, law enforcement or strategic litigation.*

Looking at Equinet membership, we can note the diversity amongst equality bodies across Europe – in terms of their size and means, their mandate, the grounds they cover (single or multi-grounds), their structures, experience and history. But essentially ALL equality bodies play a key role in providing assistance to victims of discrimination, in promoting respect for the principle of equal treatment and on securing compliance with the obligations of national and European anti-discrimination law.

Equality bodies also have a key role in promoting more equal societies. Your work can and does impact on culture, attitudes, and values at national level.

But this challenging and complex role is not always a popular one. Many equality bodies are challenged in various ways undermining their potential and impact, and have found themselves under real pressure during the recent years – some facing increased political pressure, interference in appointments or reduction of powers or budgets (or increases in powers and duties without an increase in resources).

Equinet is concerned about these factors, just as we are about the rise of hate speech and extremism across Europe. In this context, supporting strong European Standards emerged as a key priority for Equinet and its Members over the years.

Experience demonstrated that stronger European Standards - relating to the mandate, independence, and effectiveness of equality bodies - were needed to address these challenges. (to assist the European Commission in monitoring the full and effective implementation of the Directives and assist national governments in establishing effective equality bodies.)

This priority was progressed concretely last year with the adoption of a revised GPR No 2 by the ECRI / Council of Europe and a European

Commission Recommendation on Equality Bodies. These developments are the result of hard work with these partners organisations and the Equinet membership, where the contribution of our Croatian members and the particular leadership of Deputy Ombudswoman (Tena) must be acknowledged.

We welcome the level of ambition and the potential set by these new European Standards to strengthen the role, standing and capacity of your institutions as crucial actors in combating all forms of discrimination at national level.

We want to build on this momentum and work together to secure the much needed change for equality and human rights, at a time when our shared ambitions for equality and non-discrimination are being sorely tested, all across Europe.

You can count on Equinet to further support your work ahead in this direction. We are hopeful that our European Network will continue to allow you to tap on similar legislations and experience, to address specific needs and bolster your institutions with this ambition to make a difference for people and bring change in society.

Looking forward to that, and to participating in this milestone conference with you today.