

RIVER OF TOLERANCE

Don't build up so many walls among you, that only divide you,
Better build bridges – that would bring you together

Kolyu Ficheto

Within the United Nation's Interfaith Harmony Week (1-7 February 2015) in the spirit of dialogue, harmony and cooperation *Endowment "13 Centuries Bulgaria", Centre for European Refugees Migration and Ethnic Studies at the New Bulgarian University, Commission for Protection Against Discrimination* and *"BRIDGES – Eastern European Forum for Dialogue"* - *URI Cooperation Circle*, organized together a forum **River of Tolerance**.

At the information Bureau of the European Parliament in Sofia on 6 February 2015 for a round-table discussion **RIVER OF TOLERANCE** gathered together outstanding Bulgarian writers, journalists, artists, governmental representatives and nongovernmental activists, public and religious figures. All together in search of a new dimension of tolerance – post-crisis, post-2014 European elections, post-Charlie...

The event was marked by the special participation of Mrs. Mariya Gabrielle, Bulgarian MEP, Vice-Chair EPP Group and the most widely read Bulgarian author Georgi Gospodinov.

The three panels gave different focus to the understanding of tolerance – poetical and political; artistic and religious.

The poetic and scientific approach tried to find common ground in search of reasons explaining the lost curiosity to the "other", sacrificed tolerance, and rejection of diversity. And to seek a way to opening doors, building and crossing bridges to the different, to the "other".

The Bulgarian best writer 2014 **Georgi Gospodinov** underlined that today *"We need a new concept of tolerance, because it is not just patience and endurance"*. He gave a new notion for being actively tolerant with the others – **"I are"** instead of "I am". Europe today needs to rediscover the curiosity about the 'other'. *"We need new stories about the "other", new stories about Europe, because things are connected.... We need to hear his or her stories. And all this for me is summarized by the word empathy..."*

The prominent Bulgarian artist **Prof. Greddy Assa** pointed out the importance of cultivating and educating tolerance. He shared his personal experience of being different in Bulgaria and how he experienced non-tolerance. *"Here in the Balkans we live rather with more adjectives than with nouns. You are kind if you are stuttering and uttering the word tolerance. You are kinder if you can say tolerance easier."*

The importance and significance of interreligious dialogue and active tolerance as a tool for peacebuilding in the Balkans was of a main focus at the presentations of an outstanding Bulgarian sociologist of religion **PhD Ina Merdjanova**, senior researcher and an adjunct assistant professor at the Irish School of Ecumenism, Trinity College Dublin.

Tolerance is fundamentally the question about the "other" and our attitude thereof – whether we will fall to the "dealers of fears" or rather remain in the realm of calm and creative rhetoric, as **Assoc. Prof. Anna Krasteva** noted, is a matter of personal choice. She outlines two ways out as metaphors – the door and the bridge. Whether we choose to close the doors and distance ourselves or whether we will dare to pass the bridge over the river and bring the two banks closer – the future of our mutual communication in today's global, democratic societies depends on this.

