

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

Helsinki on the Hill Podcast

“Equitable and Inclusive Democracies”

Guests:

**Samira Rafaela, Member of the European Parliament, Netherlands;
Alfiaz Vaiya, Coordinator, Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup, European
Parliament;**

**Alex T. Johnson, Chief of Staff, Commission for Security and Cooperation in
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TIERSKY: Hello, and welcome back to Helsinki on the Hill, a series of conversations hosted by the United States Helsinki Commission on human rights and comprehensive security in Europe and beyond. I'm your host, Alex Tiersky, senior policy advisor with the Helsinki Commission staff.

Listeners, buckle up. This is going to be a good one. We've got some true trailblazers in the studio today. Our guests are on the frontlines of the ongoing fight for greater diversity and inclusion in Europe and in the transatlantic space more broadly, in particular in widening the circle of those included in policymaking.

Before I introduce our esteemed guests, though, I want to make sure that our listeners out there know from the get-go that this is an issue that the Helsinki Commission has been seized of for quite some time. I want to highlight only two of the many engagements by our commissioners. Of course, our ranking Senate Democrat, Senator Ben Cardin, serves as the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly special representative on anti-Semitism, racism, and intolerance. This is a position he's been reappointed to annually since 2015. I have in front of me here an 11-page report on just six months of his activities in this area that he recently presented to the Parliamentary Assembly.

Of course, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that our chairman, Congressman Alcee Hastings, in March of this year introduced legislation specifically on the issue of Black Europeans. The bill includes, I should note, this following passage: It notes that although Black Europeans have made significant achievements in and contributions to European society, large numbers have, and continue to be more likely than the general population, to experience discrimination and to be underrepresented in leadership roles in the public and private sector as a result of the color of their skin and ancestry.

So this is a set of issues that we're going to be talking about, but, again, it's part of a workflow that the Helsinki Commission takes quite seriously. And of course, we are recording today hot on the heels of a Commission hearing addressing precisely this set of questions. Now, as part of our work, our commissioners, of course, they're members of Congress. They convene hearings to explore crucial issues of the day, where they take testimony from distinguished expert witnesses to inform their work. Two of our guests on today's podcast traveled from Europe to participate in that hearing and discuss with our commissioners the persistent challenges and possible solutions in this space.

Let me now welcome to our microphones our two European guests. Let me say hello first to our, quote/unquote, our "headliner," a newly elected member of the European parliament from the Netherlands, Ms. Samira Rafaela.

Samira, welcome to the podcast.

RAFAELA: Thank you. Good morning.

TIERSKY: Ms. Rafaela is the first woman of Afro-Caribbean descent to win a seat in the European Parliament. Among her many responsibilities, she serves as the co-president of the

Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup, which for those of us from the United States we would recognize as a congressional caucus. Before her election to the European Parliament, Ms. Rafaela advised the Dutch police force on inclusion and diversity. Thanks, again, for joining us.

TIERSKY: Let me now introduce our second European guest, a leader and activist in the very best sense of those words, Alfiaz Vaiya. He currently serves as the coordinator of the European Parliament's Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup. Mr. Vaiya also serves as the co-convenor of the Transatlantic Minority Political Leadership Conference. He's the general secretary of the Belgian Inclusive Leaders Network. And in his other expansive free time, he's the co-organizer of the #MeToo campaign in the European Parliament, which calls, obviously, for action to tackle sexual harassment and abuse. Thank you for joining us, Alfiaz.

VAIYA: Thank you for having me.

TIERSKY: Great to have you.

Fellow listeners, I – the third guest on the mics today, I can't tell you how happy I am to welcome my dear friend Alex Johnson. He's the Helsinki Commission's chief of staff. This is his first appearance on the podcast. Alex, thanks for being here with us.

JOHNSON: Thank you.

TIERSKY: Alex was, of course, appointed by Chairman Alcee Hastings to lead our staff in February of this year. I should note that he serves as the Commission's first African American chief of staff since the Commission was established in 1976. And he's too modest to tell you this, but in addition to his extraordinary career with the Commission, the Open Society Foundation and the Pentagon, Alex is also known personally for his research and leadership of advocacy coalitions of diverse foreign policy professionals. He's recognized as a leader in advancing inclusion for the U.S. national security workforce.

All right, friends. We've done introductions. Let's dive into some of these issues. This conversation can and probably will go in a number of different directions but, Samira, let's start with your extraordinary story, your election to the European Parliament in May of this year. First of all, congratulations, again, on that election.

RAFAELA: Thank you.

TIERSKY: Can you tell us a little bit about your campaign, why you sought to be elected to the European Parliament?

RAFAELA: Often I get the question, well, why did you choose for the European Parliament? And it was something that I already knew since I was 16 years old. I basically said, well, if I'm going into politics, I will run for the European Parliament. And in the first place, that has to do with my own very diverse background. I'm a daughter of a woman from Caribbean and Dutch descent, and my father has Ghanaian and Nigerian roots. And he's Muslim and my mother is Jewish.

So I basically grew up with the world in my own house. And I think that really gave me a very strong orientation. But also I realized that because of being a daughter of a man who came from Africa to Europe himself, to get more social and equal opportunities, I realized that the welfare was not divided equally in the world at a very young age. And that really triggered me and motivated me to become active in politics. I was 22 – yeah, 22 when I started.

And, well, when working for government, working for the Dutch police, I've experienced things that really confirmed my opinions when it comes to social equal opportunities, how minorities in our society are being treated, the real big problem with racism and discrimination, how we look at migration, how we think we should solve migration, the rise of extremism, populism in Europe. And that really – well, that convinced me last year that I really needed to run for the European Parliament – that it was time to run for the European Parliament.

And because we make laws. We make – we are co-lawmakers, as members of European Parliament. And we control the European Commission. So that is the institute that actually has the right to initiate new laws. And therefore, it is really important that people raise the right questions, that we are also diverse in the European Parliament and in the institutions that can raise the questions, and that can either vote in favor or against laws that we think are really impactful, but not being made in the right way. So –

TIERSKY: Sure. I think I've heard you use the phrase that lawmaking must be inclusive.

RAFAELA: Yes, it must be inclusive. It must be tested before it gets implemented. And that's a real problem now in Europe, but I also see in the USA, when you are having – when we are speaking about lawmaking. And that is also the reason why I said during my campaign it should be an inclusive message. So basically went to all the groups that I – that were represented in my identity but also in my work, the recent years. So I went a lot to minority groups. I spoke to women, to youth. But I also went to the Caribbean, our overseas countries and territories – Aruba, Curaçao, Bonaire – to run my campaign over there because, you know, it's really important that even though they are on the other side of the world that they feel included. They can vote there. So that means that their vote needs to be represented. So I had a very grassroots campaign. And that delivered me the preferential votes.

TIERSKY: Yeah. Samira, I want to bring in a voice that we heard in the recent Helsinki Commission hearing that I mentioned, where a new member of the European Parliament from Sweden, she had Kurdish heritage. She said something along the lines of, many young people from immigrant or diverse backgrounds just don't feel that the political sphere represents them. It seems to be that your campaign had to do with responding to that need.

RAFAELA: Mmm hmm, yes. I totally agree. And, yes, because I realize because I've been active now for, let's say, well, eight years in politics now behind the scenes. And I noticed that myself, that often political decisions were being made. And I was like, but, you did not consult me. (Laughs.) I mean, if I – if I had to say anything – if I could say anything about this new policy, I would totally do it differently. So I recognize it myself, and that becomes a big

frustration, especially in – among youth, among people with a migrant background. And, you know, it – I can tell from my own experience, also in security, that it – that it creates problems when people don't feel engaged in society.

TIERSKY: Sure. Sure.

Alfiaz, I want to bring you into the conversation now. You're obviously the coordinator of a set of networks that works on these issues. Can you give us a little bit of context on why Samira's election is so significant? Talk to us about the diversity challenge in the European Parliament in particular, and in a broader sense what is the diversity challenge? What are the likely results of that challenge? What are the vulnerabilities that it creates in our democracies?

VAIYA: Thank you very much, Alex. It's an honor to be on a panel with Alex and Samira. And I think Samira's going to be a trailblazer in the European Parliament. And before I come to your question, I think also let's just highlight the role of the Helsinki Commission.

Chairman Hastings' work on an issue about Europe – I mean, you know, being United States and taking up the priority of citizens in Europe, that is a big responsibility but also sometimes, let's face it, not necessarily in the political interest of a politician in the United States. And so his leadership on this issue shows that it's actually something that is very close to him. So the leadership that Chairman Hastings, Alex, now and previously, Dr. Mischa Thompson, and others – we're really benefitting from that in Europe.

The Transatlantic Inclusion Leaders Network, which Congressman Hastings has supported and the Helsinki Commission has supported, actually resulted in, I think, three alumni of that network joining the European Parliament.

On your specific question, I think representation is key, because what is happening is we're making policies without actually involving the communities that are concerned. And so when you have representation, as Samira said, when she, you know, engaged in the overseas territories of the Netherlands, she actually understands because she's a representative of those communities and comes from that background how important it is to go out and speak with those communities, who have often been left behind.

So she gave the examples of the overseas territories in the Netherlands, but you can also look at that in Europe. That if you look at the Muslim community, the Roma community, the Jewish community, the Black European community, they have often not been considered in the policymaking, even though a lot of policymaking is talking about them or aimed at them. So when you're looking at legislation when it comes to discrimination, migration, counterterrorism, employment – I've noticed, working in the European Parliament for around seven years, that we haven't really engaged with those communities. And actually what we're doing is we're just – we're just making policy without actually consulting and seeing what are their needs.

And how do we build the trust between the community and the institutions that are meant to represent them? And I think that's why it's key to have people like Samira. We still see in the European Parliament a very strong amount of support for the far right. In terms of

representation, you know, the far right and people on the extreme are far more represented than people from racial, ethnic, or religious minority background, or even an LGBTI background.

And then there's an issue of when you have representation is how do you create an enabling environment where, first of all, you have accessibility, but then to make the environment safe for people like Samira and staff to come and feel as though they can work, and they can actually champion these issues. Because what we've seen in the past is when members of Parliament from a particular minority background start to speak up about these issues, and start to raise them, they are automatically attacked. And it's the idea that, you know, to scare them from speaking out, and to scare the rest of the community.

And if you're a new politician, and you constantly get abuse online and in the social media age, it changes the dynamic and it makes – you know, it prevents the policy maker from being able to speak up. So we need to see not only in terms of how we can improve our presentation, but also create an enabling environment that helps us to push further on our shared aims.

And you see how a lot of different actors are coming into power who are actually undermining the system we built after World War II, the Bretton Woods institutions, the multilateral order.

And so now it's important that progressive voices, the voices who are committed to diversity and inclusion, who are actually forward thinking – you know, thinking to 2040, 2050 when demographics change, to see how we can come together and create an alternative narrative, a narrative that, you know, is built on diversity and inclusion. Every community should have equal opportunity and equal accessibility.

The only way we can do that is if we keep on building these transatlantic relations. And that's why the Helsinki Commission's work, looking at the OSCE member states but also seeing the work we're doing and helping us to support our work in Europe.

TIERSKY: Alfiaz, thank you for that. You put a tremendous amount of substance on the table, a lot of issues that I think we're going to delve into further in the conversation. You've mentioned the Helsinki Commission's role a number of times. And that gives me an opportunity to bring Alex into the conversation now.

Alex, you've worked with Chairman Hastings for quite a long time. Chairman Hastings, of course, has a very deep engagement on this set of issues. Can you give us a few words on kind of his perspective and how you all see the work of the Helsinki Commission in this space?

JOHNSON: Thank you so much, Alfiaz, for referencing Chairman Hastings' work on this, and the need for transatlantic exchange. It has really been a priority ever since Chairman Hastings' first work in 2007 in the 110th Congress, when he took up the mantle in leading the Helsinki Commission. At that time, he actually drove a number of priorities related to advancing safe, inclusive, and equitable societies, including gearing up the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to pass a Ministerial Council decision addressing these issues. So

essentially he helped catalyze engaging among the participating states of the OSCE to have formal commitments on this. And in particular, emphasizing the fact that manifestations of discrimination and intolerance are indeed a security concern, just as Alfiaz has raised.

So we need to continue this effort in the 116th Congress. We have taken up a number of other initiatives, including legislation that will be introduced later this Congress in terms of really developing more leadership programs and initiatives to advance this work. But clearly, this is a commitment of the OSCE. The United States has signed up to focus on this exchange. And that's why these transatlantic partnerships matter. We continue to engage with organizations such as the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the State Department, and other partners to develop leadership programs like the Transatlantic Inclusion Leaders Network, which Alfiaz mentioned and which, of course, Samira was a part of. So we're honored to continue that partnership as we move forward.

TIERSKY: Alex, thanks for laying out that extensive track record. Clearly there's a lot of work that's been done in this space now for many, many years. The challenges, nevertheless, persist. And I think, Alfiaz, you've referenced the fact that they're rearing their ugly heads in a way that we haven't necessarily seen in recent years. Let's get into some of the specific issues that we should be talking about, and that I've heard you discuss in other events, for example. Samira, you referenced that you did work for the Dutch police before you joined the European Parliament. I know you've referenced that in the context of some of the advice that you were giving them on the issues of radicalization, countering violent extremism, countering violence. How does that inform both your role as a member of the European Parliament and work on this broader set of issues?

RAFAELA: Yeah. Well, I think what I said earlier this week is that it's made me realize how important it is to also, as a politician, engage with these communities, because it's really – it's about, I think, two crucial things here. So representation and then engagement. And the meaning of engagement is also that you do not only, like, show your face over there. Yes, that's important. You do that regularly, because of the connection and the friendship you're building on. But it also means that you need to bring back that input literally to the table you're sitting on, and make sure that their input is being used for good policies, for new laws. So that's really important, that also the communities that you're engaging with are seeing and feeling that you're really doing something with it. And I think – I think that really – that was really what I learned from my experiences.

But I also learned that – again, I keep saying it – work on social equality, because if you don't do that you will face these issues in security specifically. So I'm talking about giving you the equal opportunities to participate in education, to participate in workforce. Give women equal opportunities. Give people of color equal opportunities. Because all this stigmatization and exclusion is making people feel frustrated. It's really stressful. And either people are making wrong choice then, choices that are not good for society and for themselves, or either people just don't know what to do and they need to help, and they end up in all kind of systems and processes we don't want them to be.

So I think that – I think that’s what I’m really learning from my experiences at the police, but I also learned that not only in the police, not only in politics, not only in government. I think there’s a general problem of representation. And I think what Alfiaz, of course, already touched upon, is that, for example, when you talk about representation in politics, it’s not – or working for the police – it’s not always that popular within specific communities because they see, for example, how you’re being attacked. Or, when you work for the police, like someone with a migrant background, you often get the questions in your own community: Like, why are you working with them? Why are you working for the police?

So there is this lack of legitimacy and trust that keeps the – I would say, the self-fulfilling prophecy phenomenon alive. So –

TIERSKY: Sure. Samira, do you think the Dutch model of community policing, can you speak a little bit to that, and whether it had some applicability elsewhere, and bringing that to the European level?

RAFAELA: Yeah. It has. Like, for example, it inspired me to work on diversity networks within the European Parliament, for example, because the Dutch police has several diversity networks. And I was part of the Caribbean network, for example. So that meant that, you know, if there were, like, public events that had to do with the Caribbean community, then the police would go there. They would engage, not only because there’s a security risk, but also to make relationships and to show their – show their honest interest. But if there was, like, a specific issue with that community, then, like, the Moroccan network would go there, or the Caribbean network would go there. So I think that is really a best practice of the Dutch police, specifically targeting communities so that they could specifically develop approaches for specific issues concerning these communities.

VAIYA: Sorry, maybe I could just add to that why that is important, and then contextualize why that’s important in today’s climate. Because this outreach with these communities – whether it’s from policymakers or politicians, or whether it’s from police, from the security agencies, or from any stakeholder in society – it’s important because what we’re seeing happening in the OSCE region. First of all, I would say one of the biggest threats we’re seeing in the OSCE region today is this securitization narrative. So what we’re seeing, especially in a lot of member states in Central and Eastern Europe, is this – is this idea that, you know, the human right – that the state has to provide security.

But the way member states of the OSCE region have taken that and actually used that to suppress dissent and suppress, you know, community organizing and activism in their particular countries. And I think that is a particular concern because now we’re seeing that slowly creep from Central and Eastern Europe to actually Western Europe, to Southern Europe, and we’re seeing how that is very, very dangerous because that’s actually preventing dialogue with the communities, and actually is shutting down any kind of debate to create this opposition to diversity and inclusion.

And I think the second point is this outreach goes to the core of our democracy, of rule of law, and of human rights, because actually what we're seeing is the politicization of minorities. And I'll give you two – just two examples.

So we see that with disinformation campaigns, interference, how foreign governments are influencing our political narrative using minorities. So how they're using the polarization and division to actually create campaigns which either aims to get out the vote of particular communities – normally on the right – and actually suppress the communities on the left, and basically trying to put everyone into different groups and remove us from the shared society and shared identity. So that disinformation campaign basically works on the polarization.

So we need to address the polarization so we can better counter the disinformation campaigns. I think too much at policy level they were talking about, OK, what can we do with social media companies? How can we control disinformation? How can we even engage in our own counter information? But not enough on the actual issue of how particular countries or particular groups are using that polarization. So not getting to the core of the issue.

And then just to give another example, this – and issue that's not popular in Europe today is to work on the issue of combatting anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobia. And I keep on telling my colleagues in the European Parliament that actually, you know, we need to do this work because if we don't do it, we allow the Muslim community in Europe to become politicized. And the example I gave here is after the Christchurch attack, within two days you saw the deputy president of Turkey go to Christchurch and, you know, lay the wreath outside of a mosque. And this was not done because – you know, there was, of course, you know, some goodwill towards the Muslim community in Christchurch. But actually it was done for geopolitical reasons because, you know, the Turkish government wanted to show that it represents Muslims globally.

And so if we don't engage with the Muslim community, if we don't fund the Muslim community – which I understand in this political context is not popular to do, especially in Europe – to even – I see that policymakers are even scared to engage, to invite Muslims to come and speak about their issues, because automatically they'll be targeted by politicians on the right, even politicians on the left in certain cases, and in the media. But if we don't do it, we allow the Muslim community in Europe, they will – because they don't have the necessary resources within the community to organize and strategize, they will be vulnerable to outside countries coming and saying: OK, we will provide you the funding and support. And then what will happen is that they will slowly change the narrative of the Muslim community to suit the narrative of their interest.

TIERSKY: Alfiaz, I take your point. I think I would – I would capture it as a strong description of polarization as a vulnerability to our societies, if I had to summarize it. Alex, I want to bring you in on this.

JOHNSON: So I think Alfiaz and Samira captured really what's at stake specifically with this securitization narrative. Even if we take a look at OSCE commitments on these issues, they have directly referenced at the Madrid Ministerial Council decision I mentioned from 2007,

the role of media and how media can actually exacerbate misperceptions and prejudices. And so when you have this erosion of democratic institutions in Central European states like Hungary right now, where media is being consolidated in a problematic way, or state organs are being used to specifically target individuals of Middle Eastern or African origin, in terms of messaging campaigns, that literally foments conflict, which is also stated in this Ministerial Council decision as something that the 57 participating states should not be doing. So we really need to come together and hold essentially of the participating states accountable for the commitments that we've signed up to.

TIERSKY: Samira, let me bring this back to you, and to a specific example. You've been vocal about – so we're talking about marginalization as a potential vulnerability, as contributing to the polarization of our societies. You've been vocal, for example, on the debate in your own country regarding women wearing the niqab or the burka. Can you tell us a little bit – can you tell our listeners a little bit about that controversy in your own country, the stand that you've taken, and how you see that issue developing at the European level?

RAFAELA: Mmm hmm, yes. Well, unfortunately there's a law implemented in the Netherlands basically stating that it is not allowed to wear clothes or pieces that cover your face fully in the public areas, in the public institutions – like, for example, a hospital or elsewhere that is public and governmental. And that's a problem, because what if a woman wearing a burka needs help, for example? Or what if, if she needs to take care of her, you know, situations that are related to public services? And the collateral – there's, like, the problem is with the collateral damage, and with the collateral effect.

So there's this law saying that you cannot cover your face. So that means that also you, as a man, cannot cover your face and go into a hospital. But the collateral effect is that women wearing a burka are being excluded in that way from public services. But there's also – they're also having the risk right now to be attacked on the streets. Even in buses now there are examples of bus drivers that don't want to take them on the bus, because they don't understand the meaning, obviously, of the law, because, you know, these women are allowed to take the bus. But the collateral effect is that the society thinks that it is not allowed at all anymore. So what you get is aggressiveness towards these women. And there's this risk that they can be attacked in their daily life.

And it's also, for me, about freedom, the choice to – the freedom to choose. To choose. I mean, I'm a Muslim woman myself. I grew up as a Muslim. My father was Muslim. My mother is – has Jewish roots. But I grew up as a Muslim. And I, myself, find it really important that I have freedom when it comes to how I express my religion, how I practice my religion. And I feel for them. I feel for these women, because I want it to be their choice. I want them to be safe. But there is a risk now that they are being attacked in daily life. And I think that this law should never have been implemented.

TIERSKY: Is there – is there a parallel at the European level that you're looking at in the European Parliament? Are you engaged in this set of issues Europe-wide?

RAFAELA: Mmm hmm. Yeah, well, I'm in the Committee on Social Affairs and Employment. And I'm in the Committee on Women's Rights and International Trade. I'm a co-president of the intergroup – Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup. So I am trying to engage in several ways to make sure that I can influence the new legislation and policies that are being made and proposed. I will, of course, raise my voice. And, like Alfiaz said, it's not always easy and safe to do that. But I will continue with that. And I will raise the right questions.

And also, when it comes to this topic – this specific topic – I really want to monitor how this is going to develop in Europe, because I think that this is going to be specific threat to Muslim women living in Europe. And therefore, I already said to my team that we are going to meet with a forum of European Muslim women. I will invite them, to speak to them, and to hear about what their concerns are, because I think this is a specific fruit that needs to be taken into account, especially when we are speaking about their security.

TIERSKY: Again, underlining these theme that we've been talking about, representation and the importance of representation, Alfiaz, let me turn to you. We're talking, you know, in some sense about representation. Clearly migration flows in recent years to Europe have been an issue that has been a huge part of this conversation. What can you tell us about the extent of bias against migrants and refugees in Europe specifically? To what extent have your networks been working on that particular issue? Are there particular challenges in directing efforts to address hate and bias towards those communities in particular?

VAIYA: I mean, I think from a global perspective migration faces a lot of challenges. I mean, in United States you're seeing that on your southern border. So it is a global phenomenon, this backlash against migration. There are a lot of different factors – economic, financial crisis, backlash against globalization.

But it all comes from this narrative we're seeing that's happening globally, you know, which is undermining our shared values, our multilateral order, and undermining the rules-based order. And we are seeing a particular concern in Europe. I mean, we see a lot of different EU member states. We see how far-right parties are now actually in government. So they're shaping a narrative. And both the left and the right, in some cases, have copied the narrative. And that is worrying, because, you know, the moderate center ground in politics has actually shifted in Europe to the right.

And so, you know, just two weeks ago in Italy we were very close to having a far-right fascist perhaps even leading a government, you know, Matteo Salvini. And this is very different to – for listeners who are aware of Europe's history – in 1999 when Jörg Haider from the FPÖ, which was the – which is a far-right party in Austria – when the FPÖ was going to join a coalition government, the European member states threatened to boycott Austria, and threatened to take action against Austria. And now, fast forward near enough 20 years later, we actually see how the normalization has happened, that actually the far right actually is in a coalition government. And that has serious consequences.

But there is – and that's what we – the challenge for all of us around this table is to talk about the alternative narrative, because, for example, Matteo Salvini or Viktor Orbán, they

themselves understand that the biggest threat their democracy, and to their governance, is actually the fact that, you know, the social welfare state, the pension system, actually will rely on migration or need some sort of change in the labor force, because as they – as they're seeing an aging population, we're seeing also a bigger burden on our welfare states, a lack of high-skilled and low-skilled labor that actually – and the U.K. is seeing this, you know, post-Brexit. You know, even them, in this kind of situation, that actually – we actually need this labor.

But their solution to this, as Matteo Salvini, I think, said maybe about three weeks ago, that they think that they need to engage in a campaign to encourage, you know, more Italians to have children, right? So for us, it's to change the narrative and actually say, you know what? The solution is not, you know, to engage in these kind of fertility campaigns that actually we're seeing across Europe. I mean, we're seeing that in Hungary. We're seeing that in Italy. But actually to say that, you know what? We can, we have people.

And actually, let's use this. Let's have a positive narrative about diversity and inclusion. Let's be a more welcoming Europe, and actually see that this migration is going to help Europe to grow.

And so actually what we should be saying is that this is, you know, the European thing to do. That is why we've come to Washington, because we want to keep on stressing to colleagues at the Helsinki Commission but also at the State Department, that this kind of work needs to be funded and that, you know, we need the support of different institutions of the United States who have supported us, you know, in the democratization of Europe, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, you know, after the fall of Communism, that that needs to continue and actually it needs to be even stronger.

TIERSKY: Alex, why don't you jump in here?

JOHNSON: I believe we've characterized a number of challenges here collectively. And we need to really consider: What do we do now? And how do we get to a long-term vision of stable, and sustainable, and inclusive democracies? I think we've already talked about economic empowerment as an imperative, political inclusion given the great, tremendous examples we have here today, and of course this call for funding for diversity and inclusion. And one of the things that we have been building out through the work of Dr. Mischa Thompson and others on the Commission team are a package of initiatives that will essentially address some of these challenges that we've discussed.

One of the things that our political leadership across the spectrum has engaged in for a number of years is calling for an EU-U.S. transatlantic agreement on combatting racism and xenophobia. In, actually, the George W. Bush administration there were a number of bilateral agreements with Colombia and other countries in South America on combatting racism and xenophobia. And those initiatives have actually resulted in exchanges between everything from law enforcement to other institutions and have resulted in even funding for inclusion efforts. So one thing that we could do is have a similar agreement with Europe and engage in building that out.

So among that we also want to continue to address this issue of changing a narrative, and ensuing that we really raise up the political voices, like Samira's and others, to be able to tell their story, so that we can recognize the diversity and the strengths our societies that we currently live in.

RAFAELA: And I definitely agree. I totally agree. I do like – that it's so necessary that we echo each other. So it means that we need to really strengthen our voices by echoing, because are not the majority yet. (Laughs.) We are not – we are not even. And there – it's not about being – becoming a majority. But it's becoming – it's about having the right balance here. And there is not – there is not any balance yet. I mean, when we look at the European Parliament, we are – I mean, we are not – there is not even, like, a significant change, I would say, in terms of more diversity or inclusiveness in the European Parliament.

So it's really important that our – also our voices are being echoed outside the EU institutions, because otherwise it stays there. And it needs to be – it needs to be heard more. Yeah, and that's, I think, something really important.

VAIYA: And I think leadership. I mean, Samira has spoken a lot about, you know, her Muslim heritage and background. But the leadership she's shown also to be the symbol of not only her community, but other communities. You know, been outspoken on the rights of LGBTI people, of women, of other minorities, that actually that is the leadership we need.

And you know, I always mention Congressman Hastings because, you know, when you speak with the Roma community in Europe, especially Roma leaders in Europe, they always talk about Congressman Hastings because for them they're shocked that, you know, an African American congressman in United States has the time and the consideration to speak and speak so forcefully about the situation of Roma in Europe. And it's not just the Roma community. You know, Congressman Hastings has been very vocal on LGBTI, on women, on Jewish communities, on Muslim communities.

And we seen to see how we can learn from that leadership. I mean, we have leaders like Samira, who are going to grow and set – I think set the – who are going to be at the forefront of bringing that change. But we can really – I think what we need right now is also that leadership. And the one thing I would say from United States, regardless of the administration, it has been, you know, a bipartisan issue to support efforts in Europe on diversity, inclusion, democracy, rule of law. Both the Democrat and Republican leadership have always made it a priority.

And we need to see how we can engage with them and, as Alex says, to also see how we can work on particular plans. I really believe in the transatlantic partnership and relationships. I've seen how the U.S. embassies, the U.S. missions in Europe, have actually been the source of funding for many of these groups who haven't been able to access funding from their own governments. So right now, what I would stress, and what we're here to stress also at the State Department, is that in the time of cuts Europe is not left behind.

TIERSKY: Thank you for that, Alfiaz.

JOHNSON: Chairman Hastings, as a young lawyer in Florida, filed the first lawsuit to desegregate schools. The need for building coalitions and solidarity across the Atlantic, across the globe is so important. And I think both of you talked about this issue. The U.S. has actually funded initiatives through the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights for coalition building training on this very topic. And so we need to continue to fund such initiatives, even in a challenging budget environment that we may have.

TIERSKY: We only have, colleagues, a minute or two left. And what I'd like to do now is give Samira an opportunity to close us out with – we've talked about the challenges that we face. We've talked about a number of different pathways to a better future. What is the vision? If all of our – if all of our efforts are bearing fruit, let's say, in 2040, in 2050, what does a better society look like? What does a more inclusive society look like, from your perspective, at that time?

RAFAELA: Mmm hmm. Yes. I really believe in dreams. I really believe in dreaming because, you know, my dream brought me to the European Parliament. So it's really – it's really good that we are looking forward. But, first, we need to start with being brave. We need to be brave. Like I said earlier, it's not going to be easy. It's going to be tough. But we need to be brave. And we need to realize that everyone has a right to raise their voices and make use of your voice, make use of your tools and instruments, specifically, to foster change and equality. And, again, it will be tough, but just know that you have the right to do that. And that's a mindset that we need to work on. That's an attitude we need to work on. So it's also about this mental awareness of having the right to fight this specific battle for equality in the world.

So I think that when we are staying – if we are staying brave, and we are realizing that, and we change our attitude, that in, let's say, 2040, 2050, we will have a society with equal social, economic opportunities for all, for youth, for women. I hope that we don't have to speak any more about minorities. I hope that we can speak about people – everyone in society. And I hope that we live in peace and with a broad understanding of our differences, but therefore also our strengths. And that's what I hope for.

TIERSKY: Samira, those are very powerful words. Thank you. These are not just words, obviously. These are – these are things that you are living. So thank you for that.

With that, listeners, we've come to the end of another episode of Helsinki on the Hill. Samira, Ms. Rafaela, Alfiaz, thank you very much for being here with us and sharing your stories and perspectives with the Helsinki Commission. Alex Johnson, thanks for joining me on the mic today. We certainly wish you all the best for your important work going forward. Thank you for your actions and the actions of those that you inspire.

Listeners, we're always interested in hearing back from you with feedback. Get in touch with us, please, visit our website at CSCE.gov, our Facebook page, or on Twitter. Thanks again for joining us for Helsinki on the Hill. Until the next conversation, I'm Alex Tiersky, signing off.

(END)