



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

Christians in the OSCE Region: The State of Their Religious Freedoms

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“Faith is a gift of God which man can neither give nor take away by promise of rewards, or menaces of torture.”

(Thomas Hobbes, English philosopher, 1588 –1679).

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to have an opportunity to address you today. I would like to thank the Ukrainian OSCE Chairmanship, and personally Amb. Tetiana Izhevskaya, for organizing this important event and the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas for hosting it.

In the OSCE, we regard freedom of religion or belief, together with mutual respect and understanding, as key ingredients for sustainable peace and prosperity. Unfortunately, intolerance and discrimination against Jews, Muslims, Christians and other religious communities continue to threaten the enjoyment of this fundamental right. Seen through the lens of the OSCE’s comprehensive security concept, violations of the freedom of religion or belief not only threaten the security of

individuals, but also can give rise to wider scale conflict and violence that undermine international stability and security.

Today's conference gives us the opportunity to consider the issues at stake and discuss ways to address this disturbing phenomenon in all its manifestations.

Since the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, participating States have adopted a wide number of commitments on the freedom of religion or belief. The first OSCE declaration specifically mentioning intolerance against Christians emerged from the 2005 Cordoba Conference and was followed by a number of Ministerial Council Decisions that sought to develop an Organization-wide response for countering discrimination and intolerance against Christians. These decisions include commitments to act in the area of legislation, law enforcement, education, data collection, monitoring of hate crimes, media, constructive public discourse and the promotion of inter-cultural dialogue.

Participating States hold the primary responsibility to make full use of the OSCE body of commitments by introducing robust policies and monitoring their sound implementation. A number of OSCE institutions and instruments have been supporting these efforts, including the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office on Combating Racism, Xenophobia, and Discrimination against Christians and members of other Religions, H.E. Ms. Tetiana Izhevskaya.

I have also been seeking opportunities to contribute to these efforts in a coherent, strategic way. In this context, I have been promoting synergies with important initiatives such as the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, with the aim to further improve understanding and co-operative relations among nations and peoples across cultures and religions, hence countering the forces that fuel polarization and extremism. Just recently, on 19 November 2013, I met with the H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, to explore ways to increase our interaction in areas such as tolerance, non-discrimination and religious dialogue, which we both consider tools of cultural and preventive diplomacy.

I am also considering the possibility to convene in 2014 an *OSCE Security Days* event on promoting inter-faith dialogue in the OSCE area to foster informal exchanges on

the way forward with our participating States, academia, faith-based organizations and civil society.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When speaking of restrictions on the freedom of religion or belief, intolerance and discrimination against Christians, we can identify three main trends. In addressing all of them, the OSCE could further enhance its contribution.

First, basic rights to manifest their religion continue to be denied to Christians in some parts of our region. Restrictions include burdensome procedures for acquiring legal status, difficulties in obtaining burial grounds, and constraints on the right to establish places of worship. No doubts that, in working towards legal frameworks in line with international standards, OSCE institutions and field operations can intensify assistance in conducting legislative review and the publication of guidelines (such as the 2004 ODIHR/Venice Commission Guidelines for Review of Legislation pertaining to Religion or Belief).

Second, intolerance against Christians manifests itself in the form of hate-motivated incidents and crimes. These include damage, arson attacks, vandalism and desecration of churches, cemeteries and graves, physical assaults and threats against members of Christian groups. Preventing and responding to hate crimes is an essential part of the OSCE's core mission of providing early warning and preventing conflict. In this context, the OSCE should explore ways to strengthen its role as an important platform for sharing best practices and supporting awareness raising and training.

Third, Christians - even when their basic rights are being respected - may still feel unduly constrained in the exercise of their religious freedoms due to stereotyping and offensive speech, bans on proselytizing following the application of anti-discrimination and equality legislation, and inadequate accommodation of their faith in the work place. These issues touch upon the enjoyment of other fundamental freedoms, such as the freedom of expression or the freedom of peaceful assembly. In striking the right balance, each case has to be judged on its own merit, against the background of the international human rights framework and the legal/cultural traditions of each society.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Participating States recognize that discrimination, intolerance and excessive restrictions to the freedom of religion or belief pose a serious threat to our common security. It is therefore imperative to continue monitoring these trends and developing effective joint responses.

Ahead of the Ministerial Council next week in Kiev, a draft decision on the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief is currently in an advanced stage of negotiations. If adopted, the decision would seek to respond to a number of difficulties raised in recent years, in particular with regard to the legal personality of religious communities, state registration, inter-faith dialogue, discrimination in public institutions and the protection of religious sites. Such a decision would further strengthen our commitment to upholding the freedom of religion and to fighting intolerance and discrimination, including against Christians, Jews, Muslims and members of other religions.

I firmly stand behind participating States' efforts and I am ready to provide, within my mandate, all the required assistance, also counting on the support of the OSCE institutions dealing directly with the issue. In the meantime, the OSCE will continue to provide training to both civil society and government officials on hate crimes, as well as on international standards pertaining to the freedom of religion or belief, and continue to actively monitor the situation of Christians and members of other religions in the OSCE region.

Thank you. I wish you productive discussions, and a successful conference.