

Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting I

Freedom of Religion or Belief: Issues, Opportunities, and the Specific Challenges of Combatting Anti-Semitism and Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians, Muslims, and Members of Other Religions

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Opening remarks by

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Excellencies,
Ambassador Koja,
Distinguished Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the first OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting of 2017 focusing on “Freedom of religion or belief: Issues, Opportunities and the Specific Challenges of Combatting Anti-Semitism and Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians, Muslims and members of other religions”.

This is my last human dimension meeting in my capacity as Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and I am particularly delighted that this topic has been chosen because it deals with a question of fundamental, and universal importance – the protection given to our inherent capacity and desire to discover truth for ourselves and to live a life of meaning and purpose built around what we have found, and to express and communicate, socialize and associate on the basis of our diverse self-understanding and conceptions of life. This, in a nutshell, is what freedom of a religion or belief as a human right entails.

This meeting assumes critical importance given the established and emerging challenges to the full and exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief by everyone in the OSCE region. I will not dwell in depth on these issues as they have been outlined in the annotated agenda and will no doubt receive further, detailed attention over these two days. But permit me to bring two challenges to your attention, because I believe they pose particularly significant threats to our efforts to build flourishing, open, tolerant and inclusive societies – the true and lasting basis of security in the OSCE region.

One, the view that some religions or beliefs are extraneous to the identity of a people and nation and therefore can endanger social peace and cohesion. This idea is on the rise and can be found in the programmes of a number of nationalist political parties and right wing, populist anti-immigrant movements that are growing in

popularity in many parts of the OSCE region. In this view, religious and belief diversity is not a potential source of strength, it is not something to be celebrated, respected and fostered. Rather, suppression of religious and belief diversity is regarded as the primary means of ensuring social peace and so manifestations of a religious faith or non-religious belief systems that are perceived as offensive to national identity and therefore hostile to social cohesion have little or no place in society.

Two, in the interest of exercising political control over society as a whole some governments in the OSCE region have imposed far reaching measures that encroach on freedom of religion or belief.

The main concern here is to prevent certain religious or belief communities from enjoying a dynamic, vibrant and independent existence for fear that this might in the long run erode the State's control over society. Indeed, some participating States have gone so far to insist that the exercise of freedom of religion or belief – even of core elements of this human right – requires specific permission from the State, an understanding that goes against the conception of freedom of religion or belief as an inalienable right belonging to everyone, including non-believers, without distinction.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Against the backdrop of these and other worrying developments which, if left unchecked, will only serve to undermine the security of our societies, may I ask you to turn your attention to a question of fundamental importance to which we should – indeed, we must – find answers at this important meeting. Namely, how can OSCE participating States provide an open, inclusive space which ensures the full and non-discriminatory implementation of the right to freedom of religion or belief for all?

As you know, we are considering two sets of commitments at this Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting. One pertains to the right to freedom of religion or belief. The other relates to tolerance and non-discrimination. They are overlapping, mutually reinforcing and interrelated commitments. They serve the same ends, namely the peace and security of the OSCE region. They must therefore be taken forward together. We need to bear this in mind as we explore together practical strategies for translating these commitments into a lasting reality. Clearly, only a

coherent, integrated approach will ensure the effective implementation of these commitments.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you know, promoting a sustainable legal and social culture of freedom of religion or belief, tolerance and non-discrimination, mutual respect and understanding is a complex and long-term process. The challenging and sensitive nature of these topics also requires that we take into account different national and regional contexts as well as the increasingly pluralistic societies within the OSCE region characterized by a diversity of religions and beliefs. It also underscores the need to engage all sectors of society – the State, civil society, religious or belief communities, the academy, the media – in a concerted, collaborative and systematic effort to foster a culture of peaceful coexistence born of recognition of living in one shared space with multifaceted identities, interconnections and complexities. Such long-term efforts must be grounded in building relationships among and between these actors.

Communication and dialogue across religious or belief boundaries are key to building and maintaining relationship of trust and meaningful co-operation between people of different faiths and beliefs. Indeed, interfaith and interreligious dialogue is a powerful tool for engendering understanding and preventing or overcoming mistrust between religious or belief communities. When conducted on an equal footing and in a sustained manner, that is in ways that go beyond mere superficial brief encounters, interfaith and interreligious communication can help replace stereotypes and prejudices by real experiences, engender respect for everyone's freedom of religion or belief, and foster a collective, shared responsibility for the well-being of all. While many promising and inspiring initiatives in this area have emerged over the years – and we will hear about some good practices in this regard tomorrow – we are still far from realising the full potential of interfaith and interreligious dialogue and co-operation for creating the conditions for peaceful and secure societies in the OSCE region. Indeed, this will remain the case unless and until women have equal access to such efforts and young people are more deliberately engaged.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While the focus on interfaith and interreligious dialogue at this meeting is most welcome and necessary and builds on the excellent discussions on this very theme at the last Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting to be dedicated to freedom of religion or belief, we must not lose sight of one essential point. Namely, that the engagement of religious or belief communities in efforts to promote dialogue, cooperation, mutual trust and understanding can never replace the State's duty as the formal guarantor of the right freedom of religion or belief under international law. The State is not just another stakeholder alongside various actors and institutions; its obligations to respect, to protect and to promote freedom of religion or belief for all cannot be assumed by anyone else.

The presence of numerous representatives of civil society organizations and of religious or belief communities at this meeting is a welcome confirmation of the interest within civil society in the areas of freedom of religion or belief and tolerance and non-discrimination.

The high-level participation of representatives of so many governments further underscores its relevance. It also speaks to the potential of this forum – the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting – to serve as an important space for an exchange of views and experiences on national and local policies and practices related to the implementation of OSCE commitments in these important areas.

The agenda of this meeting offers plenty of scope for a full and frank discussion of the issues and challenges facing the OSCE area in relation to promoting freedom of religion or belief and tolerance and non-discrimination. We are fortunate to have with us a number of distinguished speakers whose insights will no doubt greatly enrich our conversation and serve as a stimulus to clear thinking and analysis on our part. As we explore the practical steps that need to be taken to secure the right to freedom of religion or belief for all and intensify efforts to foster tolerance and non-discrimination, please be assured of ODIHR's ongoing support and assistance to ensure the realization of these important objectives.

Thank you for your attention.