

**OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting
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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**Session III: Challenges of combatting anti-Semitism and intolerance and
discrimination against Christians, Muslims and members of other religions**

Statement by Dr. Mattia F. Ferrero
Co-ordinator of the
“Giuseppe Dossetti” Observatory for Religious Tolerance and Freedom
(Italy)

Before speaking about intolerance and discrimination on religious grounds, I would draw your attention on one of the main lessons learned from the Tirana Conference: talking about minority and majority communities has become out-dated because – as already pointed out by the Ministerial Council Decision No. 9/09 – episodes of intolerance and discrimination may affect both of them. A hierarchical approach to these phenomena implying that acts against majority groups are less serious than those against minorities would be improper: in both cases the inherent dignity of the human person is equally hurt. In this regard, the recent appointment by the EU Commission of a coordinator on combating antisemitism and a coordinator on combating anti-Muslim hatred, as well the organization of a Joint Day of Action against Antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred and discrimination, are certainly appreciable, but it should be noted with regret that discrimination and intolerance against Christians and members of other religions are not equally taken into account by the EU Commission’s strategy to combat hate crime, hate speech, intolerance and discrimination.

That being said, the situation of Christian communities across the OSCE region raises serious concerns and seems able to erode the social cohesion inside the participating States and the confidence between them. Threats and violent attacks against Christians, which can even result in the murder of individuals, are recurrent both East and West of Vienna, while profanation of Christian churches, cemeteries and other properties represents a daily reality in the entire OSCE area.

Data collected and made available by the ODIHR show us that crimes committed due to religious hatred mainly and increasingly target places of worship, cemeteries and other religious properties. About 70% of hate crimes motivated by anti-Christian bias or prejudice recorded in 2015 were committed against property. Since, in several jurisdictions, crimes

against property are considered less serious than those against persons, there is both the risk of under-recording and reluctance to investigate and prosecute these crimes. Moreover, hate crimes committed against Christians seem to receive less attention because of Christianity's position as the historically major religion. Therefore, hate crimes against Christians are certainly more numerous than those indicated in the annual reporting of the ODIHR and deserve more attention.

The effects of this phenomenon cannot easily be overestimated: it may foster a climate of fear and intimidation, thus threatening existing religious pluralism and undermining peace and stability of the whole OSCE area. Attending a church, as well as a mosque or a synagogue, is not something superfluous to life, so doing so should not become an act of heroism: it is a fundamental freedom that should be guaranteed to everyone, everywhere.

In this respect I wish to recall that, in accordance with Ministerial Council Decision No. 3/13, participating States have already committed themselves to "endeavour to prevent and protect against attacks directed at persons or groups based on thought, conscience, religion or belief" and to "adopt policies to promote respect and protection for places of worship and religious sites, religious monuments, cemeteries and shrines against vandalism and destruction". I would underline that I am not here talking about new commitments to be adopted, but rather about the implementation of those that all participating States have already agreed to undertake.

What just said might appear rather theoretical, but let me bring some concrete examples about the security of religious properties across the OSCE region. In certain zones only the presence of international military operations allows Christian communities to worship and maintain their physical presence. A federated state of a participating State has passed a law allowing houses of worship to establish security programs under which designated members are authorized to carry firearms in order to protect the congregation. In the city where I live (Milan, Italy), the magnificent Cathedral and many other churches in the city centre are guarded 24-hours by the military. An article of a world-known newspaper argued that it is impossible to protect all the religious premises in France (mostly Christian), since it would be necessary to use 368,000 people from the police or military to this end. This is the reality we have to confront when dealing with security of Christian communities.

Therefore, in accordance with its feature as a security organization, the OSCE should develop specific initiatives pertaining to the protection of Christian communities, as the ODIHR for the Jewish and the Muslim communities have already done it. Moreover, more attention should be given by the ODIHR to hate crimes perpetrated against majority

communities, both in data collection and training programs for law enforcement (TAHCLE), prosecutors (PAHCT) and Civil Society. Participating States are called upon to fully implement their commitment to adopt policies to promote respect and protection for places of worship and properties of all religious communities, benefiting from the expertise of the ODIHR in this field.

In combating hate crimes, primary responsibility rests with the participating States. It is not satisfactory that they do not commit violence themselves, but they have a positive duty to protect the individuals within their jurisdiction and punish the perpetrators. To this end training on hate crimes for law enforcement agencies, prosecutors and civil society plays an essential role in enhancing the capacity to prevent and respond to hate crimes and participating States may take advantage of expertise available from the ODIHR in this field.

Every time a hate crime occurs, we should ask whether the State has done its best to prevent *ex ante* the crime from being committed and not only to punish it *ex post*. In other words, States are required to assume all the initiatives, including non legislative ones, which are necessary to promote tolerance and non-discrimination, including educative programmes, awareness campaigns and so on.

Finally, allow me to mention the importance of data-collection in understanding and addressing hate crimes. The website managed by the ODIHR is an important tool, but under-reporting and under-recording undermine its effectiveness. Therefore participating States are required to improve their efforts on data collection through measures such as increased involvement of Christian churches and communities, enhanced disaggregated data and development of national action plan. To this end, it is essential the full implementation of the Ministerial Decision No. 9/09 in accordance with which the National Points of Contact are required to collect, maintain and make public disaggregated data on hate crimes perpetrated against members of different religions.

Despite many commitments adopted by the participating States and the appreciable work of the ODIHR, every day from Vancouver to Vladivostok, Christians still suffer violations of their right to live in security. Therefore much work is still to be done, but I am confident that this Session will contribute to better understanding of challenges and lead to appropriate responses.