



## **Working Session 7: Fundamental freedoms I, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief**

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Religious freedom lies at the very heart of the European human rights tradition. It is fundamental to the proper functioning of any democratic society. Article 18 ICCPR as well as Article VII of the Helsinki Final Act recognize that freedom of thought, conscience or religion entail manifesting these alone or in community with others, in public or private. Thus, one cannot consider belief properly protected unless it can be safely expressed.

We cannot let religious freedom become a hollow term, both for its own worth and because of how it connects with other fundamental freedoms. Last month, ODIHR Director Gísladóttir stated that crimes and intolerance ‘against people with a particular religion or belief rarely take place in isolation, but go hand in hand with other human rights violations’ and may thus negatively influence ‘the security situation in the OSCE region overall.’<sup>2</sup>

It is therefore with great concern that we continue to observe gross violations of not only religious freedom, but also of connected freedoms, including that of assembly and association. One can hardly believe that in an OSCE participating State a festive religious service would be interrupted by law enforcement officers and an elderly pastor charged with ‘illegal missionary activity’. And yet, it happened in April of this year in the Russian Federation.<sup>3</sup>

This is but one example of the dire condition in which some religious minorities, particularly Christians, find themselves in some participating States. We see individuals being prosecuted and punished for activities that are clearly protected under international law.

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<sup>1</sup> Legal Officer, ADF International.

<sup>2</sup> OSCE Press release, ‘To combat religious hatred, we must recognize its link to other human rights abuses, OSCE human rights head says’. 21 August 2019, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/428384>

<sup>3</sup> Kate Shellnut, ‘Russian Evangelicals Penalized Most Under Anti-Evangelism Law’. Christianity Today, 7 May 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/may/russian-evangelicals-anti-missionary-fined-yarovaya-law.html>

ADF International therefore **strongly urges** participating States to stop the persecution of individuals on the grounds of their religion or beliefs. It further calls participating States **to clearly reject** a standard of religious freedom that would require individuals to live their faith *privately* and *discreetly*, and to **recommit** themselves to the recognized standard in law – that is the right to *freely* and *publicly* manifest one's religion without discrimination and in community with others.