

Liudmyla Fylypovych (Ukraine)

Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Session 1

From commitments to implementation: Freedom of religion or belief in the OSCE region

Speech for the OSCE/ODIHR, Roundtable 9 July 2009, Vienna

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to take the floor in front of this distinguished audience.

I am the Head of the religious processes department of the National Academy of sciences of Ukraine. I also serve on numerous boards regarding issues of freedom of religion and belief. I have been heavily involved in both the academic study and practical application of religious freedom and tolerance.

Freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right which rests at the foundation of other freedoms. The first conceptualization of freedom of religion or belief was done in the framework of the UN General Declaration on Human Rights in 1948; this principle received further development in other international documents signed by the majority of the nations of the world, including Europe. Freedom of religion or belief became not only the juridical norm, but also a reality of religious life for many states and peoples.

We are agreed that in the course of the last 60 years, religious freedom has achieved general recognition and a large measure of success. In general, conditions have been created for the free expression—both individually and collectively—of belief and religious practice of every person.

National legislation has also been brought forward in accordance with the requirements of international documents in the spheres of religion, interfaith relations, and church-state relations.

Knowledge and expertise on freedom of religion or belief is available at the international level. This gives the possibility to make highly qualified evaluations of various situations of infringements on religious freedom on both the international and national levels.

A standard has been worked out for international laws regarding freedom of religion and related research materials are constantly published.

Interfaith dialogue is becoming an important mechanism for resolving conflicts or opposition on religious grounds.

Concrete facts in the area of religious freedom in participant countries of the OSCE bear witness that in recent years, we have seen a rolling-back of the hard-fought positive changes of the second half of the twentieth century with regard to human rights:

- instances of xenophobia and discrimination have become more frequent, particularly with regard to immigrants and new religious movements
- the number of people persecuted for their faith is not decreasing
- increased limitations in human rights can be seen in national legislation
- in some places, connections between the state and civil society are collapsing, and their convergence and cooperation are decreasing
- in areas with prescribed separation of church and state, the state is more and more frequently breaching this principle
- politicization of religious life is growing, where state and political powers use religion to advance political interests
- statist expectations are becoming stronger on the part of some religious leaders who are striving to curry favor the state
- national judicial systems are not resolving the claims made by citizens whose religious freedom rights have been infringed
- the number of cases in the European Court on Human Rights related to the defense of religious rights and freedoms is constantly growing.

The recent constriction of human rights, which had previously been expanding and deepening, seems unnatural. It is unclear why, in the presence of so many important and worthwhile declarations and recommendations, and norms have been ratified and agreed upon with regard to the right to freedom of religion, these norms do not work; why, having been adopted in legislation of OSCE nations, they are not always realized in practice.

From my perspective, what is expedient to be done for the conditions adopted by OSCE states in relation to human rights in this area (freedom of belief and religion) to work in full measure? I propose three recommendations each for the OSCE, for religions and NGOs, and for educational and media establishments.

For the OSCE:

- Strengthen programs in the sphere of freedom of belief, particularly focusing on reinforcing national institutions, such as national ombudsman for human rights
- Conduct focused activities to unify efforts of member countries of the OSCE, state and public, secular and religious organizations, such as an all-European forum of governmental and non-governmental organizations working in the sphere of defense of civil rights and liberties.
- Actively support civil society organizations, such as NGOs defending freedom of religion, and religious organizations engaging in interfaith projects, and, building on the excellent work already done by ODIHR's TANDIS website, create a catalog of such organizations with a description of their activities to facilitate the cooperation of these associations with each other.

For NGOs and religious and belief organizations:

- Disseminate information on how international structures can assist in defending human rights, especially through additional internet resources for non-English speaking peoples
- Facilitate interfaith activities that promote social and educational projects among people of differing backgrounds
- Support and expand non-denominational activities (e.g., Days of Religious Freedom, Days of Prayer, Interfaith art festivals, etc)

For educational and media institutions:

- Insistently recommend that governments support the “Toledo Guiding Principles for Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools”
- Pay special attention to educational programs for youth, for vulnerable subsets of the population from at-risk groups, and for key professionals and specialists whose employment may involve religion (such as officials in the religious affairs sphere, policemen, prosecutors, religious leaders, specialized journalists, and researchers)
- Generate interest in the media for considerations and problems of freedom of religion, initiating a contest on television and radio media circuits with display [demonstration] of video and audio materials about the activities of the OSCE in the sphere of freedom of belief.

The current situation in the world and within Europe demands special attention from international organizations. The stability of societies has been undermined by world financial and economic crisis. Realistic threats to economies, democratic political systems, order in society, and the well-being of their members have arisen. Newly democratic states also face the threat of a return to totalitarianism. We all face these new challenges of our era, and need to work together to find solutions.

Speaking on December 10, 1997 at Tehran University on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, UN General Secretary Kofi Annan proclaimed that “human rights are the best in us.” They are the foundation for human existence and coexistence. Specifically these rights make us human. The Declaration on Human Rights is the standard for a new era, in which support of contact and cooperation between peoples will determine their success and survival. Freedom of religion or belief is a crucial human right, one which appeals to the deepest and highest in all of us. Only through ensuring implementation of this right can we find the solutions to the problems that face us all.