

Address by Ambassador Janez Lenarčič
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and Human Rights (ODIHR)

Roundtable
“Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians”
Focusing on Exclusion, Marginalization and Denial of Rights

Ratsaal, Fifth Floor, Hofburg Palace, Vienna
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Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to today's Roundtable on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians Focusing on Exclusion, Marginalization and Denial of Rights.

For ODIHR, today's event has particular importance. I would like to mention two main reasons why this is so.

Firstly, it is the first ever meeting on intolerance and discrimination against Christians held within the OSCE framework.

Secondly, we have a very distinguished audience today, which includes eminent academics and international experts, including members of the ODIHR Advisory Panel on Freedom of Religion or Belief, representatives of civil society, members of religious communities and associations and delegations of participating States from different parts of the OSCE area.

I am honoured to have such broad representation from religious communities. Since its beginnings, the OSCE has been at the forefront of international efforts to promote dialogue with religious or belief communities and to seek their engagement in the prevention of intolerance and discrimination.

This roundtable was conceived under the auspices of the former Personal Representative of the OSCE Chair in Office of the OSCE on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, also focusing on intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions, Ms. Anastasia Crickley. I would like to acknowledge the efforts of Ms. Crickley in the preparation of this roundtable and thank her for her engagement in this event today, representing the EU Fundamental Rights Agency.

I am also very grateful to Mr. Mario Mauro, the current Personal Representative of the Chair in Office, for endorsing this initiative. Mr. Mauro is on his way to Vienna and will join us very shortly.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today's Roundtable is based on a solid set of OSCE commitments that, since the Helsinki Final Act, have bound participating States to take active measures against intolerance and discrimination, to respect the rights of minorities, including religious minorities, and to ensure freedom of religion or belief.

More specific commitments related to intolerance against Christians were formulated starting in 2005 with the "Cordoba Conference on Anti-Semitism and Other Forms of Intolerance", which condemned – without reservations – racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance and discrimination, including against Muslims and Christians. Since then, Ministerial Council Decisions have regularly included specific commitments on the fight against prejudice, intolerance and discrimination against Christians.

In this context, I would like to underline that the OSCE is the only international actor that has developed specific

commitments on fighting intolerance and discrimination against Christians.

It is important to recall that these commitments are based on and reflect a dual approach defined by the participating States: defining and devising policies that guarantee the principle of equality and that aim to fight all forms of intolerance – addressing broad concepts like racism and intolerance in societies – while, at the same time, recognizing the specificities of different forms of intolerance, such as intolerance against Christians and members of other religions, anti-Semitism and intolerance against Muslims.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Although this is the first roundtable organized by ODIHR on intolerance and discrimination against Christians, the preparations in the run-up to this event, and the work that will be done today, do not happen in a vacuum.

Firstly, meetings such as this one have their foundations in the unique approach developed by ODIHR in the fight against intolerance and discrimination. These include close co-operation with participating States and civil society, the

provision of technical expertise, and the development of specific tools that can be used by stakeholders, such as the educational material developed in the areas on anti-Semitism and Intolerance against Muslims.

In the past, meetings held within ODIHR's mandate on promoting tolerance and non-discrimination, such as the one held in December on the role of youth and education in addressing intolerance against Muslims, have helped ODIHR to better understand the phenomena it is dealing with and to receive practical recommendations from stakeholders on how to respond to them. Such meetings have also contributed to the creation of networks of NGOs representatives, which have facilitated the sharing of experiences and good practices.

Secondly, today's proceedings rely on ODIHR's past efforts to monitor and report on violent forms of intolerance against Christians in the OSCE region through our annual report on hate crimes. Every year, a section is specifically devoted to intolerance against Christians and members of other religions. Sadly, there is no shortage of examples of how Christians are the object of violent manifestations of hate, especially where they constitute a national or religious minority. In this context, in ODIHR's annual hate crime report, we found the most frequent hate incidents

experienced by Christians included attacks on clerics and on places of worship. In our report we point out that such attacks were often motivated by prejudice and stereotypes against Christians.

The OSCE/ODIHR is the only international organization reporting on this specific form of intolerance, but there is a need to improve knowledge on this – in order to design adequate responses.

Thirdly, ODIHR's work on freedom of religion or belief, which has become even more prominent with the establishment of the ODIHR Advisory Panel on Freedom of Religion or Belief in 1997, is also another pillar on which to base today's work.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me finally stress the importance of today's discussion for ODIHR's work. Today's event provides a platform for ODIHR, OSCE participating States and other stakeholders to better understand intolerance and discrimination against Christians, as well as the prejudice and stereotypes that are behind it, and to elaborate responses to address this phenomenon.

The participants will have the opportunity to split up in two working groups, with the objective of identifying trends, and then come back with solid recommendations to the plenary.

The first group will examine the close relationship between intolerance against Christians and the enjoyment of the rights of freedom of religion and belief. In this regard, the group will enjoy the longstanding expertise of members of the Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

The second group will be devoted to exploring the lesser-known phenomenon of intolerance and manifestations of violence against Christians. The discussion should be framed in a rights-based approach when discussing concepts of marginalization and exclusion and their relationship to intolerance.

I think that the discussion today will greatly benefit from the broad and pluralistic participation we have in this room.

I would now like to introduce the keynote speaker, Professor Malcolm Evans, Dean at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law at Bristol University and member of the Advisory Council of the

ODIHR Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief. Professor Evans will deliver an opening address in order to frame the issue of intolerance and discrimination against Christians in the OSCE region.

Thank you for your attention.