



Living in Russia today as a member of a religious minority can be a daunting and heart-breaking experience.

As you will know Jehovah Witnesses have been banned throughout the entire country and categorised as extremist. We are talking here about a religious group that exists throughout the world, who refuse to engage in violence or war, who have strong moral principles at their core but for no other reason than they may be considered as having religious beliefs that are quite different from 'the norm' – they are persecuted.

Many other Christian faiths have been targeted including the Salvation Army, Pentacostal, Adventist, Presbyterian, Baptist faiths and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Other non-Christian faiths including Muslims, Church of Scientology and Hindu groups too.

We are talking here, certainly for the vast majority of these people, about Russian citizens. We are not talking about people that want to bring about change through violent means. We are talking about people who love their country and have no wish other than to contribute in their own way to the development and creation of a better society. In a free state it is their right to choose what to believe and how to live.

Yet, due to a series of legislative proposals that have been voted into law, their country has rejected and outlawed them, or is in the process of doing so.

This is a betrayal of some magnitude by the Russian government and authorities towards its own citizens. How must it feel for these people to be criminalised for no good reason? Because by any logical and civilised definition of what can be considered as extremist and a threat to the security

of the state, these people would be free to follow their beliefs without undue imposition on others. Yet in Russia today they are not.

This is also a betrayal of magnitude by the Russian government and authorities in another way because by passing a series of legislative measures that makes communication, assembly and registration of their religions illegal a civil and social environment has been constructed where it is possible to prosecute (and effectively persecute) individuals simply because they wish to adhere to and follow their own faith.

“Who is behind this?” is a vital question to ask. I ask this especially of all the Russian delegates here today – and elsewhere. I appeal to your integrity and decency because I would think that you would be able to see that your government has overstepped the line.

I ask “who is behind this?” because I believe that the vast majority of Russians are of good faith and have no wish to see other minorities repressed in violation of human rights standards.

In fact, it is always a limited number of key people who are driving this kind of discrimination forward. People who spread false information and fear about groups, who exaggerate and dramatise the threat they propose and then go to work through the subsequent smokescreens and fear they have built up to push measures through the legislature or local administrations. I’ve seen examples of this before and it has eventually failed because decent people took a stand.

So my appeal is to you, the Russian representatives, to really look into these religious freedom issues and examine the information that is being presented to you and make your own judgements. And then, should you agree, to insist on change from your own government however difficult that might be.