

Between Respecting and Integrating: Kazakhstan and National Minorities

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(Speech at Working Session 10 – Tolerance and non-discrimination)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to talk in this working session about national minorities. I'm speaking here as scholar specialized in Central Asia studies and as representative of one independent Institute of Geopolitics based in Italy. In my research experience, I had occasion to visit many times Central Asia and in my speech I would like to make some observations about this region, with particular attention to the case of Republic of Kazakhstan. Let me remind you that Central Asia is a matter of great importance for the European Union, which from 2007 launched an ambitious strategy in regard to this region. The geopolitical relevance of the countries of this area, often linked with the energy issue, as well as the tortuous path to democratic institutions, justifies an increasing scientific commitment in order to understand her own specificity.

Central Asian Republics have gained independence only a few decades ago, therefore they are still involved in nation-building processes, charged of defining the identity of each country, but at the same time they have deal with multiethnic societies. The Republic of Kazakhstan is perhaps one of the few countries refusing to take an approach based on ethnic nationalism. The same fact that at the moment of independence the Kazakh nation did not represent the majority of population had prompted the authorities to promote interethnic tolerance and even to counter some expressions of Kazakh nationalism. The key of the State ideology is the distinction between the "Kazakh identity" (referred to specific Kazakh culture) and the "Kazakhstanian identity" (based on citizenship and shared values independently from ethnic belonging). It was a solution based on pragmatism, but also on the understanding that the country cannot survive without a supranational patriotism and even the respect of ethnic minorities cannot overrule or contradict it.

It is also remarkable the attempt to be respectful towards the faith of minorities in the field of religion. For instance, in my stays in Central Asia I have interviewed some representatives of Catholic Church, who have confirmed that Christians in Kazakhstan lives now in a tolerant ambiance. This is well symbolized by the

Cathedral of Our Lady of Fatima of Karaganda, a marvelous Roman Catholic church in neo-gothic style, which was build between 2003 and 2009 in the same city where in Soviet times the Christians were persecuted and where was located one of the largest Gulag Labor camps, the famous “Karlag”. Today, by reason of the Christians faithful are increasingly victims of discrimination and in some cases even of genocide in many areas of the world, Kazakhstan can be considered one of the most tolerant among Muslim majority countries. It is desirable to continue this effort not only in order to respect, but also to promote the diffusion of Christianity in Kazakhstan. This could enrich the culture of Kazakhstan, bringing it closer to one of the forgotten roots of Western civilization, and could make him an example for other countries.

Obviously, within a country with more than one-hundred ethnic groups it is impossible to never encounter denunciations regarding minority rights. For OSCE and other Western institutions it is important to monitor eventual cases of concrete discrimination in Kazakhstan, but also to understand objectively the complex search of balance between respecting national minorities and integrating them in a stable system those values and laws are recognized by each group. Moreover, the “Kazakh model” provide an opportunity to reflect upon the problems of Europe. We talk today about the rights of national and religious minorities, but we cannot forget that each minority can evolve into a closed community hostile toward the majority and the State itself: it is exactly the question we face now in difficult attempt to integrate some groups countering their religious radicalization and their proximity to terrorism. In order to prevent this “ethno-communitarian outcome” of our societies, risking to became a fragmented place where more aggressive groups reclaim independent laws and customs, it would be useful to remind that a strong consciousness of own culture and identity is the only criterion for determining rights and duties of minorities.