

Working session 7: Fundamental freedoms I, including Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief

Persecution of religious organizations and their members in Crimea

First of all, it should be noted that a criminal persecution of the Muslims in Crimea has substantially increased. They are accused of terrorism and extremism when the Muslims communicate on the religious topics. Only this year, according to the Crimean Human Rights Group data, thirty six people have been deprived of liberty under such cases. In total, sixty six people have been deprived of liberty under similar cases. Since they are sentenced to a long-term imprisonment – up to seventeen years – this number, unfortunately, would only increase in the future.

Apart from the Muslims, 'Jehovah's Witnesses' have been subject to a criminal persecution in Crimea since November 2018. There have been three mass searches on this religious organization members for this period, with four of them accused of extremism by the RF authorities.

Russia keeps on applying the norms forbidding missionary activities in Crimea. Religious organizations and their members are persecuted for religious rites, internal communication on religious topics, invitations to visit the church or dissemination of religious literature. The number of administrative cases against various religious organizations is increasing. If in 2018 eighteen such cases were initiated in Crimea, in September 2019 there have been twenty two already. On a whole, we have information on sixty five cases of such nature.

A representative illustration of such persecution could be a very recent case. In the summer of 2019 a group of Krishnaites met in the forest in Sevastopol to sing religious songs. This was reported in writing to the RF police anti-extremist unit. In August two Hare Krishna religious organization members were EUR5,000 fined for 'unlawful missionary activities'. The evidence was a video with singing published by the Krishnaites at their page in the social network. However, it is clearly seen on the video that they were far from people and were unable to preach to anyone.

To justify the persecutions the RF loyal Crimea mass media use regularly the hate language regarding the religious organizations. They are called 'sects' and 'agents of the West'. And though criticizing the authorities is subject to persecution in Crimea, because this is called 'incitement to hatred' against such group as 'the government', there is no case known for persecuting due to incitement to hatred against the religious groups, except an administrative persecution for negative sayings addressed to the Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate.

Considering the persecutions mentioned above, a specific position of the Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate should be highlighted. Nothing prevents its representatives from holding mass events in Crimea, with the police engaged as security people. The Crimeans criticizing this church are persecuted as for the hate language. This proves a targeted discrimination policy, when the Moscow Church enjoys a privileged status, and the others are subject to dedicated outrages.

In the end it should be pointed out that year by year the RF disrespects a demand to stop policy of persecution and discrimination of the religious organizations on the occupied territory of Ukraine, violates the OSCE commitments in the Human Dimension as to the freedom of religion, and refuses meeting its commitments as occupying power pursuant to the international humanitarian law and human rights standards.

Crimean Human Rights Group