



United States Mission to the OSCE

Session 4: Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief

As prepared for delivery by Ambassador Richard Williamson
to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
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Thank you, Moderator.

Freedom of thought, freedom of conscience, and freedom of religion are core commitments of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. They are fundamental freedoms for the individual. The unhindered practice of thought, conscience and religion does not threaten society but enriches a free society.

The United States greatly values the shared commitment made by all 56 participating States to protect the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief. However, we remain troubled by those instances where this important freedom has not been respected.

The United States designated Uzbekistan as a Country of Particular Concern for religious freedom last year. We have since had positive bilateral discussions, most recently during Ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford's visit to Uzbekistan, and look forward to seeing concrete progress in the near future. Many observant Muslims are targeted for arrest on account of their Islamic dress or practice, and have made credible allegations that they were tortured into confession. Also of concern are police raids against unregistered religious communities and huge fines against religious leaders and their communities for peaceful religious activities; impossible registration requirements and deregistration of groups; and increased criminal penalties introduced last year for so-called "illegal" religious literature production. Two pastors are known to have been prosecuted under these new penalties, with one, Pastor Dmitry Shestakov, sentenced to four years in a labor colony. We urge his unconditional release, as well as the release of two Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced in Samarkand to two-year labor terms for "illegally" teaching religion.

The United States remains concerned about the status of religious freedom in Turkmenistan. We welcomed the release of the former chief mufti, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, and urge the Government of Turkmenistan to undertake further improvements for Muslims: lifting restrictions on the building of new mosques and the number of hajj pilgrims; reopening closed Islamic education institutions; and phasing out the imposition of Ruhnama as sacred text in mosques. We also welcomed President Berdimuhamedov's recent meeting with the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom to discuss religious freedom and hope that that

meeting will result in further progress. With regard to minority faiths, the increase in police raids since February is troubling – authorities raided eight places of worship, arrested five people, fined six more, and confiscated religious materials on seven different occasions. Authorities continue to deny registration to four religious groups and recently resumed prosecuting Jehovah's Witnesses for conscientious objection to military service. In addition, we urge the unconditional release of Pastor Vyacheslav Kalataevsky, sentenced in May to three years in jail.

Concerning Tajikistan, we welcomed the visit of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion. However, the United States is concerned by government efforts to close unregistered mosques and madrassahs, as well as by difficult registration requirements for new mosques, a ban on the Muslim headscarf in public schools, a prohibition on women praying in mosques, and limitations on hajj participation. We urge the Government of Tajikistan to address these problems, as well as reinstate student Davlatmo Ismoilova, who was expelled from her university for wearing a headscarf. We are especially concerned about a draft religion law currently being discussed, which has the potential to be extremely restrictive, as well as restrictions on religious literature. We urge Tajikistan to seek technical assistance on the draft law from the OSCE Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

In Kazakhstan, several government policies are clearly out of step with OSCE commitments. For instance, in their continued efforts to expropriate land belonging to the Hare Krishna commune outside Almaty, local officials have bulldozed 25 houses, leaving families homeless while maligning their religion. Authorities have also arrested and fined both Muslims and Christians for unregistered religious activity, including in "Operation Religious Extremism," an organized sweep targeting unregistered Christian groups in northern Kazakhstan. Draft amendments to the religion law that would make more burdensome the registration requirements are also a concern. In the neighboring Kyrgyz Republic, we are concerned by government delays in registration and discussion of more restrictive religion laws. We encourage both governments to request technical assistance from the OSCE Panel of Experts or OSCE Centre on these matters.

In Armenia, the number of jailed conscientious objectors to military service is at record numbers. We urge the Government of Armenia to live up to its international commitments and create a truly alternative service opportunity and release the jailed individuals. In Azerbaijan, the jailing of Pastor Zaur Balaev and the police raids on Jehovah's Witnesses are troubling developments. We also expect that any new religion law will fully comply with OSCE standards. In Georgia, the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government continues to improve, and government policy continues to contribute to the free practice of religion in most instances, we encourage the Government to foster further religious tolerance. We furthermore urge the Government to address the difficulties minority religious groups face in building new facilities.

Since we last convened here in Warsaw, the status for religious freedom has worsened in Belarus. Under the problematic 2002 religion law, authorities continue to restrict religious activities, have harassed, arrested and fined members of several religious groups, delayed or denied registration, and deported or canceled visas of religious workers. Numerous anti-Semitic acts on religious sites occurred with little discernable government response. In addition, the

United States remains concerned about government efforts to close the New Life Church in Minsk – the indefinite adjournment of legal proceedings gives cold comfort to parishioners there.

While we note that the situation has improved for some groups in the Russian Federation in the past year, some problems continue at the federal and local level for a variety of faiths, including Russian Orthodox, Muslims, Old Believers, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants, and others. The European Court of Human Rights recently ruled that the Russian Federation violated its obligations to uphold religious freedom in four cases brought by the Salvation Army, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Scientology, and the evangelical Christ's Grace church. Authorities utilized the NGO law to dissolve one religious group, the St. Petersburg Scientology Center, which had registered as an NGO because it could not register as a religious organization under the 1997 Law on Religion. Muslims face serious problems – Federal Security officers harass Muslim clerics, and have reportedly planted evidence, arbitrarily arrested, and tortured observant Muslims and others. Officials have arbitrarily denied registration and permission to construct mosques. For instance, in Stavropol and Sochi, regional authorities have reportedly denied 39 of 47 Muslim religious organization registration applications, and the Russian Supreme court has ordered that a mosque in Astrakhan be dismantled although implementation of the decision has been put on hold pending review by the European Court of Human Rights.

In Turkey, we remain concerned about violent attacks on Christians, including the murder of three Christians earlier this year, as well as limitations on religious freedom affecting many religious groups. Authorities continue to enforce a long-term ban on the wearing of headscarves at universities and by civil servants in public buildings. We urge Turkey to work with the Ecumenical Patriarchate to reopen the religious school at Halki, and urge reforms of the Foundations Law that removes the power of expropriation and allows groups to recover lost properties.

The United States has also observed other general trends not in harmony with OSCE commitments. Clothing bans, in the previously mentioned countries but also in France and some German states, are concerning. The United States recognizes that different countries have different legal traditions when it comes to matters of religion and state institutions. In this light, we also recognize that there are certain difficult issues — such as the extent to which religion and religious symbols should be manifest in public institutions — where governments must balance competing priorities and interests. Nevertheless, we think the better approach is to respect, wherever possible, an individual's choice to manifest his or her religion, including through attire or other displays of religious symbols, in schools and other government buildings.

Separately, many countries ban religious speech that could persuade the listener to consider another belief system. These conversations are a natural outgrowth of pluralistic societies and this form of free speech should be protected and not penalized.

The United States has several concerns regarding religion laws, in addition to those already expressed. We believe Moldova should work with the OSCE to bring the new religion law into conformity with its OSCE commitments as well as register the True Orthodox Church and two Muslim groups. We urge Romania to amend its new religion law and incredibly burdensome registration system, to bring it into conformity with OSCE standards. The Slovak Republic

should consider creating a simple path for religious registration, as the newly-amended registration requirement of 20,000-members is burdensome and discriminatory. We are also concerned by the application of Serbia's religion law, as authorities have arbitrarily denied registration to several groups, as well as Bulgaria, where the Ahmadi Muslim community was denied registration under the religion law, and so obtained NGO status, which local officials are attempting to revoke because of the group's religious work.

In closing, the OSCE's "added value," its fundamental contribution, lies in its unique reach of 56 nations from Vancouver to Vladivostok, and from its Comprehensive Security Strategy and the series of commitments made by each and every member to achieve sustainable peace and security. At its core is agreement that respect for human rights in a democracy is integral to stability and security. No member state can pick and choose which human rights to recognize and protect and which to trespass. We are bound to protect all our commitments, among them the important obligation to respect freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief.