

Agenda: http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2009/07/38668_en.pdf

OSCE/ODIHR SUPPLEMENTARY HUMAN DIMENSION MEETING

Vienna, 9 July 2009

European Humanist Federation

Civil Society meeting on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Thanks to OSCE/ODIHR for giving us, members of the civil society, the opportunity to share best practices and discuss together how to contribute to the implementation by participating states of their commitments in matters pertaining to Freedom of Religion or Belief. This is a recognition of the role we are called upon to play as non-state actors who wish to have a say and be involved at policy-making level.

I suggest we bear in mind a) that Human Rights, tolerance and non-discrimination and fundamental freedoms belong to one and the same framework which means that if one human right is flouted, all are endangered and b) that the only guarantee for this framework to cohere and function consistently is the genuine acceptance and implementation of the rule of law, a guarantee for secularism and a tenet of OSCE's mission. In fact, past HDIMs show that the worst encroachments to Freedom of Religion or Belief and to Human Rights generally occur in states where the rule of law is ignored or, at best, implemented faultily.

The aim of this civil society meeting is to prepare recommendations that target past commitments and their actual implementation which all too often is far from satisfactory. Which means that we have to go on monitoring situations attentively and make the recommendations we deem necessary by pointing to problem situations related to existing commitments. However, we should also bear in mind that many years and even decades have elapsed since the cold war when part or most of these commitments were entered into.

This means that we have to be forward-looking as well and we can do so thanks to the fact that OSCE is a trend-setter in the field of Human Rights. So let us stop for a moment and ask ourselves: Do past commitments cover adequately today's political landscape with respect to Freedom of Religion or Belief, notwithstanding the momentous changes which have occurred in the past few decades, in both East and West Europe? We have witnessed huge migrations, the disappearance of many ideological underpinnings and even of whole systems of government, so let us check and see whether past commitments still suffice to-day. Let us look at the present landscape and examine whether anything new has emerged in particular in *the area of the manifestation of a religion or a belief, in the relationship between religious or*

belief communities and states, in the transformation of international norms and standards into state legal and administrative frameworks. Are the players the same as they were decades ago and if so have they undergone any change and, if this is the case, what do these changes entail for Freedom of Religion or Belief? All past commitments remain relevant and ought to be constantly pursued but they may no more suffice to avoid old as well as new discrimination and ensure social cohesion. Just think of the shifts that have occurred in religious affiliations, in the appearance on the scene of a number of different religions/sects/groups and the impressive increase of humanists, atheists, agnostics and people who just do not care about religion (35 to 50% of the population in western Europe) The *rights of non-believers* are also mentioned in the annotated agenda and this brings me to the matter of rights in general which we might want to dwell upon, remembering that the holders of rights are exclusively human beings.

A matter tied to the above and closely related to Freedom of Religion or Belief is the right of the child to freedom from indoctrination and concerns education and religion lessons in state schools. The *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* are an excellent shared reference on this subject.

Another issue which may deserve a recommendation is the *participation in public life of representatives of religious or belief communities*. This is tied to freedom of expression which applies indistinctly to each and everyone but it also concerns the distinction between public (*res publica*, which belongs to everybody) and institutional which concerns the democratic process of policy-making and is the preserve of elected representatives. The distinction between these two spheres is of paramount importance (a non-negotiable principle as Pope Benedict would say) in states governed by the rule of law.

We civil society associations who work at the grass-roots are the privileged observers of the quality and extent of commitment implementation. We can spot problems as they arise, inform governments and raise their awareness also by submitting recommendations to the plenary as we prepare to do this afternoon. If we can do all this it is thanks to the invaluable support of the ODIHR which deserves the maximum recognition from governments and should be encouraged to develop a comprehensive capacity building program for civil society organizations and their representatives.

I thank you for your attention. However, before leaving you I would like to read out a recommendation that I prepared yesterday on my flight to Vienna after reading the following sentences from the Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI:

“Yet it should be added that, as well as religious fanaticism that in some contexts impedes the exercise of the right to religious freedom, so too the deliberate promotion of religious indifference or practical atheism on the part of

many countries obstructs the requirements for the development of peoples, depriving them of spiritual and human resources”.

“On the other hand, ideological rejection of God and an atheism of indifference, oblivious to the Creator and at risk of becoming equally oblivious to human values, constitute some of the chief obstacles to development today. A humanism which excludes God is an inhuman humanism.”

My recommendation is the following:

Whereas freedom of religion or belief is to be considered in the more general context of tolerance and non-discrimination,

whereas in some countries the representatives of a prevailing religion or belief (apart from enjoying huge privileges which in themselves discriminate against others’ religions or beliefs) are usually able to exercise a considerable influence on social and political life,

whereas the progress made towards greater tolerance between religions is to be commended, we note a growing intolerance of the non-religious in the language used by some religious representatives,

the SHDIM Civil Society meeting recommends that

all those in positions of influence and especially religious leaders refrain from using disparaging and dehumanising language with respect to people of different religions and beliefs and exercise their influence in a manner conducive to dialogue and social cohesion.

Vera Pegna
European Humanist Federation representative to OSCE