



Forum 18 News Service <http://www.forum18.org>

*The right to believe, to worship and witness*

*The right to change one's belief or religion*

*The right to join together and express one's belief*

***Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief  
is an essential foundation for tolerance and non-discrimination***

The Helsinki Final Act of 1975, the OSCE's foundation charter, states that "participating States will respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion." It is impossible to separate from other human rights and the rule of law as a litmus test of the state of freedom in any society, embracing, freedom of speech and association, freedom to promote and change one's beliefs, freedom of the media, freedom to think differently, and so on.

Real tolerance and non-discrimination can exist only if human rights such as religious freedom for all exist. The OSCE's 2005 Cordoba Declaration stressed the importance of "ensuring the freedom of the individual to profess and practice a religion or belief, alone or in community with others through transparent and non-discriminatory laws, regulations, practices and policies." However, such commitments are often not implemented. Indeed, some states claiming to encourage tolerance whilst at the same time making direct attacks on religious freedom. It appears that these OSCE states think that:

- 1.) it is possible to promote and practice tolerance, whilst attacking religious freedom;
- 2.) and that it is possible to make OSCE commitments without the intent to put them into practice.

Kazakhstan, for example, tries to promote an image of tolerance, as in its hosting in June 2006 of the OSCE Tolerance Implementation Meeting. President Nursultan Nazarbaev told that meeting that "for us the principle of tolerance is not only the norm of political culture but is also one of the key principles of Statehood, which we are supporting and strengthening in a most decisive way." But as he spoke, his daughter's mass media was conducting smear campaigns against both unregistered Baptists and Hare Krishna devotees – which Hare Krishna devotees are convinced provokes aggressive attacks on them from other Kazakh citizens. One state official even referred to the devotees as a "terrorist organisation." The government continues to threaten to bulldoze the only Hare Krishna commune in the region and levels of fines on unregistered Baptists have recently gone up. In some Kazakh regions, state registration is highly intrusive, demanding information on the ethnicity ("Kazakhs, Russians, Germans, Koreans, Tatars, and Others"), family status, religious education of congregational leaders, their age and type of work and "the most acute problems worrying parishioners", as well as details of members' political affiliation. "Facts demanding attention on the part of state bodies," are also required.

Other freedoms in Kazakhstan have also come under state attack, for which it has been strongly criticised by the ODIHR, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, and election observers from the Parliamentary Assemblies of the OSCE and the Council of Europe, as well as the European Parliament. As Kazakhstan's experience demonstrates, attacks on religious freedom are linked with attacks on wider human rights and directly attack the tolerance which the OSCE strives for. And without religious freedom, the tolerance and wider human rights which the OSCE strives for cannot flourish.

But this is not the OSCE's worst situation. That is arguably Uzbekistan, with its long record of attacking the religious freedom of the majority religious community, Islam, as well as minority communities such as Christians, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Hare Krishna devotees. Many other OSCE states seriously attack religious freedom and hence tolerance and non-discrimination, such as Turkmenistan, Belarus, and Azerbaijan. In Belarus – a land which witnessed the Holocaust – a Jewish teacher has been threatened with criminal prosecution for celebrating a Jewish religious holiday with Jewish children. In the past week in Belarus, Catholic priests and nuns have been threatened with expulsion, and the state has moved to take a Protestant church's building away from it.

Many states in the eastern part of the OSCE region are not working to create the basic conditions for religious tolerance. Privately, senior officials of some states constantly stress to Forum 18 that "we are not Europe, and blindly following Western models of religious freedom could lead to destabilisation of the country".



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However, this state intolerance of religious freedom can feed the linked problem of intolerance in everyday life. In Central Asia this intolerance is mainly towards nominal or devout Muslims who join minority faiths, becoming Christians, Hare Krishna devotees, or Jehovah's Witnesses. It is a major factor behind moves in Kyrgyzstan to legally punish the sharing of beliefs. Our correspondent Igor Rotar thinks that the main issue in everyday life is intolerance from members of the majority Muslim faith, and that at least two factors are at work in this— the perceived theological need to punish those who convert, and a view that those who convert are in some sense betraying their national identity. Some who claim a Muslim motivation for their intolerance – as in the case of the December 2005 murder of the Protestant Saktinbai Usmanov in Kyrgyzstan – are not devout Muslims.

Given that the most serious discrimination and intolerance against religious believers of all faiths comes from governments themselves, which feeds intolerance in everyday life, what is to be done?

Basic "human dimension" insights of the OSCE process must be acted on: that "security is more than merely the absence of war," and that "a free society allowing everyone to fully participate in public life is a safeguard against conflict and instability," as the ODIHR puts it. So when states such as Uzbekistan downgrade OSCE missions and especially the human dimension element – as happened on 30 June after some staff were denied accreditation - we need to ask whether the OSCE can agree to this while staying true to its basic insights. A senior western diplomat has noted with concern that other states too are considering following this Uzbek approach.

Threats of destabilisation and the dangers of religious extremism are genuine. But we should not make the mistake of accepting these concerns when they are used as excuses. The ODIHR's own investigation of the 2005 Andijan tragedy found no evidence of the religious extremism said by the Uzbek government to be the root cause. As the 2005 Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Human Rights and the Fight against Terrorism emphasized, religious freedom is an essential tool in effective counter-terrorism. States which break international religious freedom and wider human rights commitments help to frustrate counter-terrorism initiatives across the entire OSCE region – for example to stop terrorist recruitment.

The respected Azerbaijani Muslim theologian Nariman Gasimoglu – himself the target of Iranian-inspired death threats for his work – has strongly argued to Forum 18 that religious freedom for all is the best counter to religious extremism. He notes that extremist groups are strengthened by repression while moderate Muslims – as well as other religious communities such as Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses - have suffered. The best, if not the only way to counter religious extremism, Gasimoglu maintains, is to open up society to religious freedom for all, democracy, and free discussion – even including extremist groups. He sees this as the only way of depriving extremism of support, by revealing the reality of what extremism in power means. Forum 18's correspondent Igor Rotar has found that many who support extremist groups do so without any real knowledge of what such groups stand for. They gain support because repressive governments are against them, on the basis that "my enemy's enemy is my friend."

For real tolerance and non-discrimination, the human right of religious freedom for all must be defended. Three recommendations persecuted religious believers of all faiths have given Forum 18 are:

- The concrete implementation of OSCE and other human rights commitments must be insisted on.
- Specific religious freedom and other human rights violations must be publicly named.
- Make it clear through concrete actions – for example visa bans on officials - that policy towards OSCE states which violate religious freedom will be strongly influenced by the practical actions those states take in relation to all religious communities, not just state-favoured ones, and that paper improvements alone will not be viewed as improvements.

Without the fundamental human right of religious freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination cannot exist.

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