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FOR NATIONALITIES AND RELIGIONS, AT THE OSCE
CHAIRMANSHIP CONFERENCE ON INTOLERANCE
AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MUSLIMS
SESSION 5
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Mr. Chairman,
Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Ukrainian delegation allow me to express my gratitude to the OSCE and the Government of Spain for providing me with the opportunity to participate in this international conference.

Freedom of conscience and religious freedom are fundamental values common to all mankind. Freedom of religion means not only the proper functioning of religious institutions belonging to different denominations but also legal, social, political and economic opportunities and guarantees for the free religious self-determination of the individual. Freedom of religion is based on the equality before the law of all religious organizations and, first and foremost, all believers.

More than 33,000 religious organizations representing 55 religious denominations are currently operating on Ukrainian territory. All these religious associations are developing at quite a pace. The number of religious communities among ethnic minorities is increasing constantly, with around 1,500 associations of believers (15 per cent of the nationwide religious network) at the present time. The largest group is made up of followers of Islam. Today there are 1,113 Muslim religious organizations operating in Ukraine. They are actively developing a network of spiritual and educational establishments; they have their own religious publications and operate seven Islamic universities and madrasas. The centre opened in the city of Simferopol to train hafiz (reciters of the Koran) is the fifth training establishment of this kind in the world. It should be mentioned that from the middle of the last century until the proclamation of Ukrainian independence no Muslim community officially existed on Ukrainian territory.

Owing to the return of 250,000 Crimean Tartars from the places they had been deported to many years earlier, most of the Muslim religious organizations (almost 80 per cent of those operating in Ukraine) are concentrated in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. Consequently, one can see a dynamic increase in the entire Muslim segment and in its importance in the processes taking place across Ukraine. Muslims belong to one of the most dynamically developing religious movements.

Today the Ukrainian branch of Islam is represented by four independent centres: the Spiritual Direction of the Muslims of Ukraine, which brings together 66 religious organizations; the Spiritual Direction of the Muslims of Crimea, bringing together 338 religious organizations; the Independent Spiritual Centre of the Muslims of Ukraine, with 22 organizations; and the Religious Direction of the Independent Muslim Communities of Ukraine known as the “Kyiv Muftiat”, with 10 organizations.

Muslim religious organizations have been given 65 places of worship to use as their own; 76 mosques have been built and a further 20 are under construction.

In spite of this, only around 50 per cent of Muslim religious organizations have a place of worship of their own at the present time. The failure to solve this problem is resulting in conflicts between religious organizations, including conflicts between Muslims and Christians, with regard to the allocation of plots of land for the construction of buildings for sacred purposes and their location in places of historical significance. With regard to the property of religious organizations, it should be particularly emphasized that it serves as the material basis for the realization of the spiritual rights of the individual and is protected by national legislation and by international law.

The revival of Islam, especially on the Crimean peninsula, has its own specific characteristics associated with the resettlement of the Crimean Tartars, who have traditionally professed this faith, and their reintegration into Ukrainian society.

There is today in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea a confessional balance and a genuine desire on the part of the Muslim Crimean Tartars and of the Christian Slavic population to support good-neighbourly relations between their peoples.

Nevertheless, this balance is not stable, as the religious segment remains non-homogeneous and accordingly there is some potential for conflict. It should be noted that Muslim-Christian relations remain potentially tense.

In spite of certain difficulties and uncertainties in the processes occurring in religious life, Ukrainian society has realized that it is necessary to establish the universally recognized norms of freedom of conscience, norms which are anchored in the international documents adopted by Ukraine and which are now reflected in its national legislation. At the same time, not only laws and the work of the State authorities have a bearing on social relations associated with freedom of conscience. More often than not legal norms merely consolidate the spiritual traditions, views and ideological positions of the citizens.

In view of the multi-confessional and multi-ethnic nature of the Ukrainian State, the foundations of tolerance and a liberal attitude towards religion in the social consciousness are being formed within the framework of a nationwide dialogue involving representatives of State establishments and of religious and public institutions.

The concept of a nationwide religious dialogue involves a process of multi-level communication between its participants, a free exchange of information and views, the comparison of positions and ways of solving problems, and the holding of appropriate meetings at different levels. At the same time, the forms and substance of the dialogue are not limited by this because there is also provision for an active phase of relations and the

practical co-ordination of the activities of its participants with a view to mutual understanding and agreement.

It should be noted that representatives of Ukraine's Muslim community on the whole display a high level of interest in developing dialogue with representatives of the Christian faith and a tolerant attitude towards them. For example, according to sociological studies, 63 per cent of the Muslims questioned believe it is essential to engage in a dialogue with Christians and more than 54 per cent respect Christians, while only seven per cent of those questioned were opposed to interconfessional dialogue and six per cent condemned Christians. Another positive aspect is the tolerant attitude of the Slavic population towards the revival and spread of Islam. For example, there have been no acts of protest in recent years against the holding of Muslim religious events.

At the same time, a topical issue remains the unbiased and objective coverage in the media of the activities of Muslim organizations, especially following the events of 11 September 2001 and a number of other terrorist acts and in view of the fact that some parts of Ukrainian society have developed certain fears about Muslims and prejudices towards them. Unfortunately, in a number of national media there has been unconstructive and highly subjective reporting, with reference sometimes being made to foreign sources of information. Also cause for concern is the fact that according to recent sociological studies, 65 per cent of the Muslims questioned would be ready to participate in acts of protest if the religious foundations of Islam were defiled while 35 per cent would do so in the event of discrimination on religious grounds.

Each confession has, by definition, its own specific features and distinctions, its models of religious teaching and system of worship. These specific features and distinctions become most noticeable in the relationship between different confessions as components of a single multi-confessional religious space. On the subject of the development of religious pluralism in Ukraine — as an event that has taken place — it needs to be especially emphasized that such pluralism is in fact the basis for constructive relations among different religious denominations.

In that connection, religious pluralism does not just mean a simple aggregation or a normal diversity of religions but also the coexistence of an array of subjects of religious relations not one of which should be allowed to dominate the others; equality before the law of all components of the religious landscape; unity in diversity, without which the religious environment would be characterized by a climate of intolerance and conflict.

In this context, the work of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, which includes both representatives of the leading Christian churches of Ukraine and leaders of the country's Muslim religious centres, has a notable impact on the status of relations between the State and different denominations. The work of the aforementioned Council has a positive influence on the strengthening of concord and tolerance among religious organizations of different denominations.

At the same time, the Spiritual Direction of the Muslims of Crimea has unfortunately still not resumed its participation in the work of the interconfessional organization "Peace — the Gift of God", an organization which brings together leaders of the majority of the religious organizations in Crimea and which the Spiritual Direction of the Muslims of Crimea

left in 2006 as part of its conflict with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. This situation is having a negative effect on the state of interconfessional relations on the peninsula.

The current priorities of Ukrainian State policy in the area of religion make provision for a deepening of the theological dialogue between representatives of the relevant churches and religious organizations with a view to a better understanding of one another's system of worship and the elimination of prejudices and negative elements.

The next priority is the social sphere. It is after all on the basis of reciprocal action that Christians and Muslims can devise a common approach to the acute challenges of the present times, in particular to issues connected with globalization, environmental security and protection of human life and of the institution of the family.

Another aspect of mutual understanding should be the protection and promotion of high moral values, in particular a healthy way of life, and efforts to deal with manifestations of immorality and debauchery.

Organized forms of contacts in this connection have included different kinds of conferences and round tables, with follow-up provided in the form of common actions, in particular cultural, educational, charitable and other socially oriented measures.

A priority aspect of the State policy in the area of freedom of conscience remains the question of ensuring inter-ethnic and interreligious harmony and preventing the spread within society of political and religious movements of an extremist or radical nature that promote racist and radical views in their activities.

An analysis of information, statistics and judicial rulings shows an absence in Ukraine of cases of intolerance or discrimination on the grounds of religion, including discrimination against followers of Islam. At the same time, with a view to preventing and dealing with any asocial manifestations within society, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine has instructed the Ministry of Justice when drawing up a draft law on the bases of domestic and foreign policy to make provision for legal norms that would prevent the spread and promotion of xenophobia, racism and anti-Semitism and any manifestations of intolerance towards and discrimination against ethnic or religious minorities.

On 23 October 2006, the Committee for the Legislative Support of Law Enforcement Activities of the *Verkhovna Rada* (Parliament) of Ukraine examined and returned for revision a legislative initiative and a draft law on the introduction of amendments to the Criminal Code of Ukraine regarding responsibility for offences with inter-ethnic, racial or religious hatred or enmity as a motive. The draft law (registration No. 2252) is intended to create legal bases for strengthening the role of the law enforcement authorities in countering offences of this kind.

Pursuant to Presidential Decree No. 154 of 28 February 2006 concerning the decision of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine of 8 February 2006 on the social situation in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, a regional programme is being implemented with a view to establishing a climate of tolerance in Crimean society as a means of providing early warning of ethnic and religious conflicts, and a special course in the "culture of good-neighbourliness" has been approved for State educational establishments and Sunday schools of Christian churches.

We believe that the implementation of a range of systematic measures and the up-to-date strategy of co-operation between the State and religious institutions will help to establish a climate of tolerance and mutual respect and instil universally recognized moral and ethical principles in the social consciousness, actively countering at all levels possible manifestations of racial or religious hatred.

Systematically committed to the universally recognized principles of the separation of Church and State and non-interference in the internal affairs of religious organizations, principles that are anchored in our national laws, the Ukrainian State will continue to do everything it can to assist the promotion and intensification of dialogue among religions, in particular the dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

This work should strengthen social peace and harmony, help surmount inter-ethnic conflicts, ensure the protection of the rights of religious minorities and establish a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect in the social consciousness.