



Your Forum for Religious Tolerance & Human Rights

OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

Warsaw, 29 September 2009

Working Session 2: Fundamental Freedoms I

**“State Sanctioned Religious Intolerance
in European Countries”**

Statement & Recommendations to the OSCE/ODIHR

BACKGROUND:

In Austria, we have over 70 percent Catholics. Islam, with 400 000 Muslims constitutes the second largest faith community. There are approximately 600 religious minority groups. Only 14 faith communities enjoy special privileges by the state. With a population of 8.2 Million Austria has no less than 34 Anti-Sect offices operating in the country. Proportionally, this marks an unmatched record in Europe and even on a global scale.

- Including the Federal Sect Observatory, there are six (6) state sponsored sect-observation offices
- Nine (9) Catholic Sect Offices
- Seven (7) Protestant Sect Offices
- Four (4) Private Sect Offices
- and eight (8) Family Counselling Offices with special emphasis on “Sectarian issues”.

Austria’s constitutionally granted freedom of religion and the neutrality of the state in religious matters is torpedoed by the following facts:

1. The Federal Sect Office

In 1998, the Austrian Parliament passed the Federal Law for the Establishment of a **Documentation and Information Office for Matters Concerning Sects**. The tasks of this office, whose head was appointed and supervised by the minister for social security and generations, were to collect and distribute information about dangers originating from programs or activities of sects or sect-related activities. **The Federal Sect Office** received in recent years annually over €500 000, - support from the Federal government, that means the taxpayers money.

1. **“Sects” within the mainstream churches are excluded from observation** by this office. The law is not applied to state-recognized churches and confessional communities and is therefore discriminatory (Expert View by Prof. Dr. Christian Brünner Karl-Franzens-University of Graz, Institute for Austrian, European and Comparative Public Law, Political Sciences and Public Administration, President of FOREF Europe).
2. The in 1998 appointed **director of the federal sect office** is the former leader of the controversial Vienna based, private Anti-Cult Organisation

3. **Two key staff members (of 6) in the federal sect office:** A Catholic theologian and a pedagogue in Protestant theology.
4. The Federal Sect Office is regularly briefing the sect offices of the mainstream churches on the activities of minority religions.
5. Even on its official website the Federal Sect Office is advertizing the sect offices of the mainstream churches according to the motto: “Big fish eats little fish!”
6. **The federal government is still using the derogatory and stigmatizing term “sects” for minority religions and thus sanctioning the use of this term in the educational system & media. This is clearly violating OSCE standards and the EU standards regarding anti-discrimination.**
7. Besides, in Austria there is **no legal protection in cases of defamation of religious organizations.**
Teachers repeatedly justified their discriminating behavior towards pupils from minority religions with the mere existence of the Federal Sect Office. Furthermore, the government issued a anti-sect brochure (widely distributed by the Ministry of Family & Youth). The use of anti-sect videos, which are being circulated nationwide in schools for religious education, but occasionally also in social and political education, are violating the religious freedom of pupils (see next paragraph).

Recommendation 1:

We appeal to the OSCE to propose an independent scientific advisory board to accompany & monitor the activities of the Federal Sect Office in Austria.

Or otherwise to follow the German example: Close the office and thereby set a positive example to promote religious tolerance according to OSCE standards.

2.43 Anti-Sect Videos in Austrian Schools

Most high-school students have to attend lessons on “Sektenufklärung”, which in reality means biased anti-cult lessons in religious- and social education.

The information contained in the materials (Videos disseminated by the “Landesbildstellen”) & Pamphlets is not only largely outdated. It is also

discriminating and biased, since it is often produced by the apologetic quarters of the mainstream churches in order to project their view on small religions or so called ‘sects’. Especially children, whose parents are members of a targeted religious minority, are suffering under these circumstances.

So far the Ministry of Family & Youth nor the Ministry of Education & Cultural Affairs has not done anything significant to prevent the use of discriminatory & stigmatizing anti-sect teaching materials.

Recommendation 2:

We appeal to the OSCE to propose an **independent scientific board** to the Austrian Ministry of Education i.o. to assess the circulated information materials on religious minority groups with the purpose of eliminating outdated and discriminatory content. Even these materials are used in religious education; the state still holds responsibility to stop the misuse of the educational system for discriminatory purposes.

3. Austrian Legislation on Confessional Communities (1998) **“reating a religious class society”**

The 1998 Act on the Legal Status of Registered Confessional Communities has been criticised by various constitutional experts & human rights organisations to create an atmosphere of spiritual apartheid and a religious three class society in Austria. The unconstitutional nature of this legislation has been highlighted by the European Court of Human Rights in the case of the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Recommendation 3:

We ask the OSCE to recommend less discriminatory models of legislation to the Federal government of Austria. (take examples from the OSCE region).

4. Kazakhstan

The Case of Liza Drenicheva – a young missionary woman (Unification Church) sentenced to jail for 2 years for doing missionary work:

Friday, 9. Jan 2009 Mrs. Elizaveta Drenicheva (28) had to go to jail in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The pronounced punishment for the young missionary is no less than two years behind bars in a District prison. According to the prosecutor, E. Drenicheva was sentenced for **“having committed heavy crimes against the peace and security of humanity”**.

THE “BIG CRIME”:

Mrs. Drenicheva gathered 4 people for a seminar and over a course of four days she taught to her audience the Unification Principles, the Theology of the Church of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon.

Update (September 09): Mrs. Drenicheva has been released from prison after two months and could return to Russia to take care of her sick mother. However, so far she has not been vindicated in court and she is still regarded guilty for “*having violated the peace and security of humanity*!” An appeal to reverse this verdict has been filed.

Until Mrs. Drenicheva is totally vindicated, the members of the Unification Church in Kazakhstan fear that they too may be put to jail like Liza, when they simply exercise their religious duty by sharing their faith.

Putting a young missionary woman behind bars - for doing nothing else but practicing her religious duties in proclaiming her faith - is another clear violation of the very principles the OSCE is trying so hard to implement in the Region.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

We therefore ask the OSCE to appeal to the Kazakh government to protect the rights of minorities and grant equal religious freedom to all churches – the large ones and the small ones.

Kazakhstan’s challenge for chairing the OSCE in 2010 is to set an example by implementing OSCE standards in the field of religious freedom, which is a fundamental human right.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:



Your Forum for religious Tolerance & Human Rights

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Kazakhstan: Two year jail sentence for church missionary



FOREF-Almaty/Vienna: Friday, 9. Jan 2009 Mrs. Elizaveta Drenicheva (28) had to go to jail in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The pronounced punishment for the young missionary is no less than two years behind bars in a District prison. According to the prosecutor, E. Drenicheva was sentenced for “having committed heavy crimes against the peace and security of humanity”.

Mrs. Drenicheva is Russian citizen. She has joined the Unification Church in 1995 and started her missionary work in Kazakhstan only 3 years ago.

Already in April last year the Committee for National Security (KNB - former KGB) of Almaty undertook operations, such as bugging phones and offices. Also they are said to have observed Church members and associates in their activities related to the Unification Church, which has been a registered NGO in the country since 1997.

According to Mrs. Drenicheva: *“On July 2nd, 2008 at 6 am KGB officers broke into the building of the Peace Embassy as well as into our flats to make a random search. They took away all our literature and computers. I was arrested. Other members where asked not to leave the country. After two days I was released from the pre-trial prison and had to sign a written pledge not to leave the country.*”

On October 24 legal proceedings got under way in the Almalinskiy District Court of the City of Almaty. I was accused according to the article 164 part 2 of the Criminal Code of Republic of Kazakhstan for “having violated the peace and security of humanity”!”

THE “BIG CRIME”:

Mrs. Drenicheva gathered 4 people for a seminar and over a course of four days she taught to her audience the Unification Principles, the Theology of the Church of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon.

Mrs. Drenicheva's crime had been to gather a small audience for a seminar to study the theological teachings of the Reverend Dr. Sun Myung Moon. An undercover KNB agent who, under the pseudonym "Medvedev", had infiltrated the audience, claimed the content to be "propaganda that showed signs of harmful effects on the integrity of the state".

However the **Chief of Kazakhstan's International Bureau for Human Rights, Mr Eveniy Zhovtis** maintained the theological teachings to be biblical interpretations that were not markedly different from those of other religions and questioned whether the trial meant that the government would now similarly start putting priests, monks and nuns into jail.

He summed up the situation by saying, "*The fact that such a trial even got under way is truly a disgrace. It's a shame on a country that has suffered so much due to religious persecution. You could hardly imagine a better way to discredit our country.*"

The expert on human rights has also been referring to Kazakhstan's expected OSCE Presidency in 2010. This has not been confirmed yet, since a proposed new law on religion has caused an outrage of critique from the international human rights community as well as from OSCE itself. The draft of the law is said to fail the OSCE standards of human rights by far. That may well be the main reason, why the passing of the law is still on hold.

In October 2008 at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (Warsaw) Kazakhstan was heavily rebuked by various human rights defenders and NGOs for restrictive measures on religious communities and the proposed law (see attachment). One of the numerous examples for that practice was the tearing down of the only Krishna Temple in the country.

Kazakhstan's challenge for chairing the OSCE in 2010 is to set an example by implementing OSCE standards in the field of religious freedom, which is a fundamental human right.

Putting a young missionary woman behind bars - for doing nothing else but practicing her religious duties in proclaiming her faith - is another clear violation of the very principles the OSCE is trying so hard to implement in the Region.

This report has been written by Peter Zoehrer

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Link to Video of the Trial:

http://foreignnations.org/sites/frame/ucnews/elizaveta_drenicheva_trial.html



Your Forum for Religious Tolerance & Human Rights

The Role of Religion in the Protection of Human Rights and Human Dignity

Statement presented by
Peter Zoehrer
Secretary General, FOREF-Europe



Geneva Conference on Interfaith Cooperation
and the Protection of Human Rights and Dignity

September 1-2, 2008, Geneva, Switzerland

The Role of Religion in the Protection of Human Rights and Human Dignity

1. The power of true religion

Mr. Chairman, your Excellencies, Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen: in 1948, exactly 60 years ago, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which operates as an authoritative guide in the field of human rights. FOREF Europe seeks to promote the vision of religious freedom found in Article 18 of the Declaration:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, alone or in community with others, and, in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

As his Excellency Ambassador Makarim Wibisono has correctly stated: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has largely been drafted by experts of religion.

Religion has always played a central role in the protection of human rights and especially in the promotion of human dignity. For example the abandonment of slavery was inspired by the biblical concept of “Imago Dei” (Genesis: All men are created in the image of God).

What makes religion strong in the protection of human rights and human dignity is:

- Its emphasis on man’s spiritual and eternal nature and dignity as a child of God.
- Its rejection of hatred and violence
- Its obligation to practice love by living for others
- Its power to forgive and reconcile
- Its vision for a world of peace, harmony and mutual prosperity

2. Abuse of Religion as violation of basic human rights

Sadly, throughout history - even until today, religion has often been misinterpreted, misunderstood and misused for hegemonial interests, discrimination and even violence. (crusades, inquisition, religiously motivated wars until today).

If a particular religion claims to be exclusively assigned by divine providence to be the only one, the human rights of people of other faiths or convictions can be severely endangered.

As Rev. Dr. William McComish stated: Never quote a spiritual source to justify discrimination or violence!

That is the very reason why true religious leaders and defenders of religious freedom always emphasise the importance of religious tolerance.

3. Religious Freedom as a fundamental human right

"The right of freedom of conscience and belief ... religious freedom constitutes the very foundation for the other fundamental freedoms of man!" Cardinal Franz KÖNIG (Austria)

For a religious person, can there be any other right more important than the freedom to worship your creator and follow his will in the way your conscience commands you to do? Mr. Chairmen, your Excellencies, the importance of religious freedom has been dismally neglected by political leaders! On the contrary, great human rights defenders have always regarded the freedom of faith and conscience as the “mother of human rights”. Therefore, the significance of religious freedom for creating social harmony and world peace cannot be emphasised enough.

4. Religious Freedom in Europe under threat

"Each civilisation should be judged by the way it treats her minorities!"

Mahatma Gandhi

The escalation of religious intolerance and discrimination throughout the new Europe should be a matter of great concern to our political leaders, the European Union and the United Nations.

- Anti-Semitism is on the rise again.
- Islamophobia is spreading throughout Western - and Eastern Europe.
- Sectophobia – the irrational fear of so called “sects” or religious minority groups has been rising during the last 40 years in Western Europe and since the fall of the iron curtain is now also manifesting in Eastern-Europe.

This is not just a mere assumption. Even governments and powerful state sponsored organisations are still supporting the agents of intolerance and discrimination (of minor religions and new religious movements).

Mr. Chairmen, your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen: It is exactly this kind of religious discrimination that Article 18 was designed to prevent. This is made clear by the UN Human Rights Committee, which in its Comment 22 states:

Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions. The Committee therefore views with concern any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reasons, including the fact that they are newly established or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility by a predominant religious community.

Various European governments have created “black lists” of religious minority groups. Sadly, according to the motto “big fish eats little fish”, even main stream Churches are often promoting state sponsored discrimination of so called “sects” or small religions. This has been possible through their powerful constituencies in most European countries.

5. The case of Austria

In Austria, we have over 80 percent Catholics. Islam, with 400 000 Muslims constitutes the second largest faith community. There are approximately 600 religious minority groups. Only 13 faith communities enjoy special privileges by the state. With a population of 8.2 Million Austria has no less than 34 Anti-Sect offices operating in the country. Proportionally, this marks an unmatched record in Europe and even on a global scale.

- Including the Federal Sect Observatory, there are six (6) state sponsored sect-observation offices
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Austria’s constitutionally granted neutrality of the state in religious matters is torpedoed by these facts. Members of religious minorities from Austria and neighbouring countries report numerous cases of religious discrimination in schools, communities and in their workplace. Even established NGOs with a consultative status at the UN (ECOSOC), who are running peace initiatives or relief projects in line with the UN-Millennium Development Goals reported to FOREF, that their work has been severely hampered by the interventions of the so called “sect experts”. Victims especially hold the state responsible for creating an atmosphere of religious intolerance and spiritual apartheid. As a result, in July the European Court of Human Rights has rebuked Austria for its discriminating legislation against non-traditional faith communities.

6. Institutionalised discrimination of religious minorities in Europe

In spite of many objections by faith communities, the Council of Europe granted FECRIS (*Fédération européenne des centres de recherche et d’information sur le sectarisme*) consultative status in 2005. The named organisation - under the banner of human rights - promotes discriminating anti-cult legislation throughout Europe. FECRIS receives substantial funding (over 90% of its annual budget- as quoted by the SG of the organisation) from the French government. Numerous protests of human rights defenders in the OSCE, COE, the UN and other Institutions have yet to bear fruits.

7. FOREF recommendations to religious leaders, NGO representatives and human rights defenders

- Appeal to governments to stop funding prejudiced public and private organizations which promote and propagate defamatory statements about faith communities and religious organisations. Such activities infringe the principles of tolerance and integration promoted by the UN, OSCE, COE and the European Union.
- Appeal to religious leaders to promote tolerance toward all religious groups, regardless whether they are weak or strong, large or small.
- Appeal to religious leaders to invoke the great power of religion for reconciliation and peace building. After all, we are one family under God.

"We must learn to live together as brothers and sisters or perish together as fools."
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

End of statement

Brief history of FOREF Europe:

1998: FOREF (Forum for Religious Freedom) & Religious Freedom Website (www.religionsfreiheit.at) was initiated by Peter Zoehrer (Austria) "out of necessity", since the government has just introduced two new laws, severely curtailing the rights of religious minority groups: 1) the establishment of a "federal sect observatory office" (annual budget over €500 000), 2) the introduction of a law for "confessional communities".

2003: FOREF regularly reports to the media, OSCE, US-State Department, Human Rights Without Frontiers and various other human rights organisations on religious freedom violations in Austria & other European countries.

2006: FOREF-Europe registered as an official Association (NGO). Prof. Dr. Christian Bruenner, a renowned constitutional expert becomes president & Mr. Zoehrer takes on the job of secretary general.

2007: FOREF establishes an international scientific board of experts & a religious board.

2008: The website counts 100 000 to 150 000 hits per month and has become a respected religious freedom monitor and medium-forum for members of religious minority groups, their opponents, public media, legislators, government agencies and Human rights defenders.

During the past 8 years FOREF scored over 30 victories in helping victims of religious intolerance to regain their rights, get vindicated from injustice, discrimination or persecution.