



**Alexander Verkhovsky**  
**SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, Moscow**

**For workshop "Freedom of Religion or Belief"**

## **Discrimination against religious groups in the context of security concerns**

*Address to the Advisory Panel of Experts*

Our societies are concerned about religious intolerance, especially after well known incidents of religiously motivated violence. That's why it makes sense to talk about setting limits to promotion of religious intolerance and even, in some extreme cases, about establishing sanctions for such propaganda. But of course in doing so one must preserve guarantees of basic human rights.

The state always finds it attractive to implement sanctions which are too restrictive against potentially dangerous propaganda, especially when faced with the threat of real terror.

The scrupulous observation of the principles of the secular state is one good way to avoid this attraction. If government officials are addressing law enforcement issues, they should limit themselves to legal principles rather than religious precepts.

In Russia, for example, many officials rely on the term "spiritual security", when they mean that the state must defend a religious foundation for the public welfare. Sometimes this may result even in the expulsion of foreign missionaries, whose preaching has nothing to do with violence or hatred as in the case of a Baptist preacher who worked in a Muslim community in Tatarstan.

Government officials should maintain ideological neutrality in regard to religion. They for example should not try to decide what ideas are seen as radical under Islam. It should be left to the muftis to discuss that question.

It is very important to make a public and accurate assessment of what constitutes such propaganda. It should only be the courts which decide what constitutes dangerous propaganda. Such court decisions set the framework for the public discussion of this issue.

But what is the case in Russia today? "Hizb ut-Tahrir" party followers are sentenced only because they belong to this banned organization. In 2004, the Russian Supreme Court banned "Hizb ut-Tahrir" as a terrorist organization solely on the grounds that it was banned in other countries. But the Court didn't even consider the question of whether or not "Hizb ut-Tahrir" propagates dangerous ideas.

In many countries, courts may prohibit dissemination of some dangerous texts. But a banned text may turn out to be the fundamental religious book for a certain religious community. In such cases these bans violate freedom of conscience for the peaceful adherents of the prohibited text.

Once one starts to ban religious texts for their intolerant views, it's hard to know where or when one will stop. For example, in Russia terrorism in the Northern Caucasus is partly connected to the propagation of Wahhabism. As a result, last year a Moscow court banned the book of the founder of Wahhabism, written in the XVIII century. I doubt that all Wahhabis in Russia are dangerous, but now they are all deprived of the possibility to buy this book - and not only they, but everyone. As a direct result of the banning this book, various other groups have tried to get other sacred texts banned. These attempts include efforts to ban even the Bible - due to its highly intolerant language against pagans.

The various ways in which the Bible has been used in history, should show us that discussion is the best way to overcome religious intolerance, not prohibition.