

Osservatorio per la Tolleranza e la Libertà Religiosa
“Giuseppe Dossetti”
Observatory for Religious Tolerance and Freedom

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From Vancouver to Vladivostok no part of the OSCE area is immune from manifestations of intolerance and discrimination. Many persons and groups are subject to threats or acts of discrimination, hostility or violence as a result of their racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious identity. New forms of intolerance and discrimination, based also on the ground of property or social origin, are fuelled by the ongoing global economic crisis and the migrants' flows. All these phenomena undoubtedly threaten the social cohesion inside each participating State, but only some of them are able to erode confidence between States and trigger violence and conflict on a wider-scale, putting in danger the peaceful relations among the States.

Before speaking about intolerance and discrimination on religious grounds, let me draw your attention on one of the main lessons learned from Tirana Conference: talking about minority and majority communities has become out-dated because – as already pointed out by the Ministerial Council Decision No. 9/09 – episodes of intolerance and discrimination may affect both of them. A hierarchical approach to these phenomena implying that acts against majority groups are less serious than those against minorities would be improper: in both cases the inherent dignity of the human person is equally hurt. In this regard, the recent appointment by the EU Commission of a coordinator on combating antisemitism and a coordinator on combating anti-Muslim hatred is certainly very appreciable but it should be noted with regret that discrimination and intolerance against Christians and members of other religions are not equally taken into account by the EU Commission's strategy to combat hate crime, hate speech, intolerance and discrimination.

That being said, the situation of Christian communities in the OSCE area is serious and seems able to erode the social cohesion inside the participating States and the confidence between these. Both East and West of Vienna there are recurring hate-motivated incidents and hate crimes against Christians that can even result in the murder of individuals, while profanation of Christian cemeteries and churches is a daily reality.

Data collected and made available by the ODIHR show us that crimes committed due to religious hatred mainly and increasingly target places of worship, cemeteries and other religious

properties. About 60/70% of Anti-Semitic hate crimes and hate crimes motivated by religious bias or prejudice were committed against properties. Since, on the one hand, in several jurisdictions crimes against properties are considered less serious than those against persons and, on the other hand, hate crimes committed against majority communities receive less attention, hate crimes against members of religions and, especially against Christians, are certainly more numerous than those indicated in the annual reporting of the ODIHR.

This year a participating State has established a security-funding scheme for the provision of protective security for places of worship, while a federated state of another participating State has passed a law allowing houses of worship to establish security programs under which designated members are authorized to carry firearms to protect the congregation. In the city where I live (Milan, Italy), the magnificent Cathedral and many other churches in the city centre are guarded 24-hours by the military. An article of a world-known newspaper argued that it is impossible to protect all the religious premises in France, since it would be necessary to use 368,000 people from the police or military to this end. This is the reality where we are living now!

The effects of this phenomenon cannot easily be overestimated: they may foster a climate of fear and intimidation, thus threatening existing religious pluralism and undermining peace and stability of the whole OSCE area. Going to a church, mosque or synagogue is not a luxury, neither can become an act of heroism: it is a fundamental freedom that should be guaranteed to everyone, everywhere.

Therefore, in accordance with its feature as a security organization, the OSCE should develop specific initiatives pertaining to the protection of Christian communities, as has already been done by the ODIHR for the Jewish and the Muslim communities. Moreover, more attention should be given by the ODIHR to hate crimes perpetrated against majority communities, both in data collection and training programs for law enforcement (TAHCLE), prosecutors (PAHCT) and Civil Society. Participating States are called upon to fully implement their commitment to adopt policies to promote respect and protection for places of worship and properties of all religious communities, benefiting from the expertise of the ODIHR in this field.

In combating hate crimes, primary responsibility rests with the participating States. It is not satisfactory that they do not commit violence themselves, but they have a positive duty to protect the individuals within their jurisdiction and punish the perpetrators. To this end training on hate crimes for law enforcement agencies (such TAHCLE program), for prosecutors (like PAHCT program) and for civil society plays an essential role. Moreover participating States are required to do their best efforts in order to prevent the hate crimes from being committed through educative programmes, awareness campaign and so on.

Finally, let me mention the importance of data-collection in order to understand and address hate crimes. The website managed by the ODIHR is an important tool, but under-reporting and under-recording undermine its effectiveness. Therefore participating States have to improve their efforts on data collection through measures such as increased involvement of civil society, enhanced disaggregated data and development of national action plan. To this end, the National Points of Contact are called upon to collect, maintain and make public disaggregated data on hate crimes perpetrated against members of different religions, in accordance with Ministerial Decision No. 9/09.