



Statement by Ambassador Christian Strohal Director, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

Session 5: Fighting intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions: respecting religious identity in a pluralistic society

OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism and on Other Forms of Intolerance
Cordoba, 09 June 2005

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen and Colleagues

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief has been one of the core commitments of the OSCE's 55 participating States since the 1975 Helsinki Final Act. Over the past 30 years, these commitments have been considerably expanded and reaffirmed, most recently in Decisions of the OSCE Ministerial Council in 2004 and 2005 which committed participating States to:

- Ensure and facilitate the freedom of the individual to profess and practice a religion or belief, alone or in community with others, where necessary through transparent and non-discriminatory laws, regulations, practices and policies;
- Recognize the importance of a continued and strengthened interfaith and intercultural dialogue to promote greater tolerance, respect and mutual understanding;
- Seek the assistance of the ODIHR and its Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Already in 1997, the ODIHR established a Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief in order to provide guidance, advice and expertise to participating States in their efforts to implement the OSCE Commitments related to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.

In order to better meet these tasks, the ODIHR's Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief was reformed in 2004, in order to broaden its expertise, extend its geographic range and ensure an effective working structure. The Panel now consists of more than 50 experts from across the OSCE region with a newly-created Advisory Council comprising 15 of those experts.

The Panel continued to work in the field of legislative review throughout 2004. In September, the ODIHR published the *Guidelines for Review of Legislation Pertaining to Religion or Belief*, which was drafted by members of the Panel of Experts in association with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission. These guidelines, which are also being translated into Russian, will assist the Panel and others across the region to continue improving legislative frameworks.

The expanded Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief has repeatedly supported a number of participating States in their efforts to review their laws pertaining to freedom of religion or belief, using the newly developed Legislative Guidelines as a basis.

In December, Panel members co-organised and participated in a conference in Georgia on possible reform to legislation on registration of religious and other associations. The Panel of Experts also conducted a review of a Serbia Draft Law on Religious Organizations, and in March 2005, attended a roundtable for discussion on the draft law with officials in Belgrade. The Panel also provided comments on the Draft Laws of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "On counteractive measures against extremist activities" and "On amendments to several legislative acts with regard to counteractive measures against extremist activities".

The ODIHR also supports activities by members of its Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief in the field of tolerance education. During 2004/2005 the ODIHR supported the Centre for European Studies of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow in publishing Polish and English versions of a compilation of essays by Polish experts entitled *Why Should we Teach About the Holocaust?* In January 2005 a revised Polish version of this compilation of essays by Polish experts was launched and during this Conference, the second edition of the English version will be presented. The ODIHR has also supported the Panel with the development of a *Website Guide to Tolerance Education* (<http://tolerance.research.uj.edu.pl/en>).

The Panel has also worked, in association with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, on the development of a training module on international standards and jurisprudence relating to freedom of religion or belief. The target participants of the training module include government officials, law-enforcement authorities, field-mission staff, journalists, NGOs, and religious communities themselves.

I encourage all states to benefit from the expertise and initiatives of the ODIHR's Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief in their efforts to implement their commitments in the area of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.

Thank you.