

**Statement by the Personal Representative of the Chairperson-in-Office on
Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, also focusing on
Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and
Members of Other Religions**

**Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2017
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Statement delivered per video

Your excellences, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

I regret that I cannot be in Warsaw in person – more so, since this year’s HDIM focusses on issues central to my mandate as a Personal Representative of the Chair-in-Office on racism, intolerance and discrimination particularly when directed against Christians and members of other religions.

At present, we do observe growing social and political tensions within the OSCE region which have some social causes (partly a neglect of social and economic rights) but are substantially fuelled by the resurgence of nationalisms, which are often albeit at varying degrees fused with religious identity politics. This leads to an increase in negative attitudes towards members of other races and religions at a truly frightening speed. Terror, which blasphemically uses the Name of God, contributes to these polarizations. These developments are a fundamental threat to universal humanism as the basis of human rights and to peace in the region. They are particularly damaging at a time when globalization makes many societies ever more plural, ethnically and religiously, which most obviously requires more and not less respect for the “Other”, whatever his/her Otherness may be.

The right of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) has been one of the pillars of the OSCE architecture from its very beginnings, being interlinked with all other freedom rights as well as social and cultural rights. To strongly anchor this insight and the importance of human rights in general in our societies we need broad public debates based on freedom of expression and association, so as to promote the ideas and values that guide us. Even more, we need to promote a new universalist and humanist narrative based on human rights for the continent which takes into account the respective contribution of the legal, civil and moral spheres and which seeks to engage religious communities as important parts of civil society.

Ladies and gentlemen, my mandate is a double one. Including this meeting’s focus on women let me briefly state in three points the challenges I see from this perspective:

- (1) It is obvious, however, after some events in the past weeks the “obvious” has to be restated: Human rights are incompatible with any form of racism or racist supremacy. The situation should be a call to creatively think about initiatives in different countries - taking

into account specific contexts - so as to actively oppose these dangerous wide spread tendencies (e.g. Charlottesville-Initiative of Theologians against Racism as one example). The OSCE is engaged in a lot of programmes, also on intolerance and discrimination against members of religions, which – though there are overlaps in individuals – should however not be equated. Racism and discrimination based on religion are different categories as human rights documents affirm.

- (2) As do intolerance and discrimination in general, discrimination and acts of violence against Christians worldwide (both inside and outside of the OSCE region) are unfortunately on the rise, targets being religious personnel, places of worship, as well as persons and Christian communities actively engaged in refugee work, as I learned at a country visit in Germany in May. In many states, violations of the right to freedom of Religion for Christians go hand in hand with other human rights violations (mainly freedom of press, of association, of minority rights), which calls also here for a multidimensional approach. There has been some progress in legal provisions for conscientious objection, but there remain legal and social discriminations in contexts where Christians or particular Christian denominations constitute a national or also social minority.
- (3) This meeting focusses on the discrimination of women in combination with the right to freedom of religion and belief. Women, as is well known, generally face multidimensional discriminations, legally as well as socially, in states but also within religious communities. Let me say it clearly: That women are inferior to men has been a dogma everywhere and at all times in history notwithstanding other cultural differences. Human rights regimes are trying to overcome this fundamental, age old bias. For this programme of emancipation a long breath and a firm perspective as well as serious commitment of both women and men are needed. This holds true for societies and states, but also for religious communities which often react with a somewhat fundamentalist *No* with regard to changes in women's rights. This does not do justice to women and goes against the common good. Of course, as I may say as an ethicist - ethics and law are not mathematics (as already Aristotle stated) – that means, there is room and need for discussion in this sensitive area to search for and find better solutions. But basic rights are non-negotiable. Women need to be empowered to freely choose how they want to participate in society and in faith communities. Women's rights programmes of the OSCE should strengthen any efforts to further equality also in religious communities last but not least through practical initiatives.

To name just three issues:

- All religions have theological resources to further the dignity of women as equal persons with equal rights, which can be developed so as to strengthen the position of women. This could also help to forge alliances between women of different creeds.
- Intercultural and interreligious dialogues on women issues with men and women participation should be furthered, not only at the top levels (where religious leaders are mostly male and women consequently underrepresented) but at all social levels.

- It must be clear that gender-based violence can never be supported by traditional or religious values. In reflection on and promoting these issues OSCE should play an important role.

Here as in other matters concerning social cohesion the role of states to create plural and inclusive societies is becoming ever more important. Legal provisions are needed to deter people from discriminating others, as those on hate crime, hate speech, disaggregated data etc., where some progress has been made. It is, in my view, however just as important for states to actively support social integration and cohesion, be it through education at all levels of age and competence, including modules to increase religious literacy, to further the encounter between different communities and to creatively stimulate civil society initiatives that foster alliances between the moderate majorities.

Each and every individual carries as a citizen the responsibility to contribute to this process. He/she can indeed do a lot to overcome social tensions. Who has not made the experience that prejudices, which - if we are honest - we all have to varying degrees, were changed meeting an agreeable person from another race or religion. Legal measures based on human rights constitute the foundation. They have, however, to be complemented by morals and firm convictions as well as by the civil courage to practice them so as to further the dignity of each and every human being for the sake of peace in the region.

Thanking you for your attention I wish you a fruitful meeting.

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