

MUSLIM DENOMINATION IN BULGARIA ENGLISH only
(Office of the Grand Mufti)

Policies and strategies to further promote tolerance and non-discrimination

Vienna, 14-15 April 2016

On behalf of the Office of the Chief Mufti in Bulgaria I would like to express appreciation for the initiative of the German OSCE Chairmanship to organize a the SHDM on “**Policies and strategies to further promote tolerance and non-discrimination**”.

There has been a discernible increase in Islamophobic sentiments and activities in Bulgaria and anti-Muslim demonstrations, consequently intolerance and discrimination are becoming more and more pronounced. Extreme nationalist movements and Media are the driving force for **anti-Islamic discourse and attitude** in the country. In this connection I would like to highlight a few significant examples and some recommendations.

One of the most concrete manifestations of anti Muslim rhetoric is that strong attitudes against Islamic symbols such as the mosque, the performance of religious rites, speaking in Turkish, have been taking root among the Bulgarian public opinion. Muslims are often subject to harsh comments and remarks, even to acts of aggression when they are recognized as Muslims. Unfortunately, religious Muslims are treated as radicals or fundamentalists. There are numerous **attacks on mosques**, including arson, and none of the culprits have been brought to justice. According to the statistics of the Grand Mufti’s Office the number of incidents in the last 20 years is more than 200. We have also submitted a report to ODIHR on anti-Muslim incidents in Bulgaria for 2015.

Media also plays an important role in forging a negative public opinion towards Muslims. Some media outlets and journalists contribute to the establishment of Islamophobic attitudes. Programs with discriminatory content and offensive rhetoric are allowed to be broadcast on TV. Also some public figures and politicians openly incite hatred and violence against minorities, Turks and Muslims in the country, especially migrants by a persistent defamation campaign through the media. They introduce hate speech to mainstream discourse, both in politics and media. And the latter ones influence a lot the speech of regular people. Hate speech is growing in Bulgaria. Recently the situation has become worsened, especially with the new global challenges such as refugee crisis, the war in the Middle East and fatal ideology of "DAISH", which negatively impact on Muslim communities in Europe including Bulgaria.

Similar case in recently that is widely discussed by politicians, media and part of our publicity is the **construction of a second mosque in Sofia**. It is known that the only available one in the capital city is not enough to house the flow of worshippers. It can house 500-600 people; at the Friday prayer more than 700 people come and depending on the season about 250-300 people stay outside. The most outstanding cases are on the holidays, around 2500 to 3000 Muslim men come to the mosques who unsuccessfully try to hear the sermon, to pray and perform the service together with the people in the mosque for about two hours. That’s why The Office of the Grand Mufti opened a prayer rooms in different localities, one of which is at “Lulin” residential district in Sofia, which is registered at the Directorate of Religious Affairs

to the Prime Minister and Sofia Municipality and the Imams are appointed by the Office of the Grand Mufti and they provide service legally.

However, lately the media reflected the news that some mosques and mesjeds (prayer rooms) in the country, especially in Sofia are illegal and clandestine, as well as the worshipers preach radicalism. On this occasion we can see the example of cooperation between media and political party. Obviously the protests have organized by the politicians, as the members of VMRO (a Nationalistic Political Party in the National Assembly), as well as a Christian clergyman were seen among the protesters on 13 March, the date of first gathering. The public reactions against mosques rise, as the people congregate at the prayer room every Friday, as it causes the feeling of insecurity and social discomfort among the Muslims. Thus the media and politicians provoked reaction and protest of a group of people in Sofia against the prayer room in Lulin locality, as well as created tension and atmosphere of hate between people. Thus the distorted news of the media reporting about the Muslims in the country creates tension between Muslims and non-Muslims.

With regard to the state institutions and local governments, they haven't made any press statements for more than 20 days in order to explain the truth and calm the protesters down. Such a lenient approach on the part of the officials also leads to increased anti-Muslim sentiments in the society. Finally, on April 1, the Minister of Interior made a statement that there is no radicalism in the prayer room in Sofia, as well as it's not illegal. It's praiseworthy and inspired with hope.

And lastly, I'd say that these prayer rooms exist, because the existing mosque in Sofia (it's only one) is inadequate, as well we do not have permission for the second one, though we have our own place for construction and project for 15 years.

Another disturbing issue is the attempts of local governments to change Turkish **geographical names**, as well as the names of the streets in the towns. Recently the mayor of Karlovo town expressed such an intension. The topographical names have to be changed, because they make sense according to Turkish. The initiative came from the municipal members of the nationalistic political parties. This is a peculiar "**regeneration process**" that this once touches not the names of people, but the names of objects. This presents a political break into the natural territory of the language and has an effect on the ethnical tolerance of the multi-cultural society in Bulgaria. Most of these geographical objects have never had other names in the history. Similar attempts at local councils to adopt controversial resolutions on historical issues, containing a selective reading of history. It also means denial of the history. Some of these municipal councils are in Karlovo, Plovdiv, Sliven, Ruse, Burgas, Varna, Stara Zagora towns. It indicates that the levels of racism and intolerance against everything associated with Turks and Muslims are very high. This process is very danger and may provoke new dividing line in the society. It also constitutes a breach of the acquis of the Council of Europe and EU in this regard. Such initiatives reduce citizens' trust the state and its institutions. They feel insulted, repelled and alienated.

School curricula also contribute to the intolerance and Islamophobia in the public opinion and bring about prejudices and stereotypes against the Muslims. In the textbooks history of

Bulgaria is presented in a parochial manner, accordingly the narrative regarding the Ottoman rule in Bulgaria and the subsequent Bulgarian-Turkish relations is quite prejudicial taking into account the nation building process. Not surprisingly it helps forge a negative image of Muslims or Turks in the Bulgarian society. When it comes to Muslim, students first remember the evil oppressors and that in the absence of them bigotry and hatred run deep in the collective psyche.

Unjustified intolerance and discrimination against Muslims might be dangerous for the mutual respect and understanding in the future in Bulgaria. Prejudicial discourse and hate speech increase the feeling of insecurity among the targeted groups and inflame tensions in the society. Lack of understanding and confidence towards Muslims nourish mutual suspicions against one another disturbing the smooth functioning of democratic rules and the respect for European values.

We can also present examples of good practices for mutual coexistence. The existence of National Council of Religious Community in Bulgaria, which consists of the representative of the main Religious Communities, is a good example of interfaith dialogue.

A common practice is that Muslims to aid and help their Christians neighbors. Recently, local Muslims in the village of Kozlets (Haskovo municipality) reconstructed the church "St. Arhangel Michael" and its bell tower with their own funds and then saved it from collapse. The village has about 600 residents, while Christians are only sixty and therefore they found it difficult to repair it. Another example is that in a village of "Novi Izvor" Muslims in the village helped their Christian neighbors to carry out an overhaul of the local church "St. George". These are good examples of coexistence and tolerance and that people can live together in harmony regardless of their religion, as well as show once again that Bulgarian Muslims are conscientious, loyal and dedicated citizens of the Republic of Bulgaria and do not deserve that neglectful and sometimes even threatening attitude. Therefore, we sincerely hope that you take the necessary steps for a further study, analysis and identification of the substance of our allegations.

Also the Prosecutors and Hate crime training (PAHCT) of ODIHR conducting in Bulgaria is great initiative. Such kind of training and educational activities should be improved and continued.

In conclusion, we sincerely hope that you take the necessary steps for a further study, analysis and identification of the substance of our allegations.

Office of the Chief Mufti Office appeals to the Bulgarian authorities and the OSCE for a more active intervention in order to eradicate offensive political rhetoric and discriminatory attitudes against Muslims. Promotion of tolerance, non-discrimination and mutual understanding in a society included different ethnic and religious groups should be cornerstones of the government internal policy. To attain an objective outlook towards the minorities, education system should be revised.

In this context I would like to make some particular proposals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Bulgarian authorities:

- Undertake measures to ensure that Council for Electronic Media combats with the explicit form of racism and discrimination committed through media and internet;
- Use ODIHR's experience and expertise in combating anti-Muslim hate crimes by law enforcement officers and political actors;
- Take effective measures, including the adoption, in conformity with the constitution and international obligations of Bulgaria, of such laws which can be necessary to provide protection against any acts that constitute incitement to hatred;
- Ensure that public officials at all levels, including ministers and politicians, refrain from making statements that incite to violence and discrimination;
- Disseminate and use ODIHR guidelines for educators on countering intolerance and discrimination against Muslims;
- Develop codes of conduct for political representatives to condemn unequivocally all manifestations of hate in public discourse and acts of violence based on bias and refraining from making discriminatory statements;
- Guarantee that public broadcasting services avoid stereotyping of religious and ethnic groups and report fairly on such groups in conformity with the highest professional and ethical standards including during election periods and public gatherings;
- Engage in partnerships with private media, including Internet providers, in order to prevent dissemination of information which include prejudice, stereotypes and hatred;
- Develop comprehensive education policies and awareness raising strategies to combat discrimination and promote tolerance and mutual understanding. Education must be the essential central plank to every strategy. Overcoming prejudice requires education, community engagement and dialogue;
- Launch public awareness activities disassociating terrorism and violent extremism with Muslims and Islam;
- Another steps in addressing discrimination and non-tolerance are political will and legislative action. In the current climate of fear and insecurity, political and community leaders have a vital role to play in speaking out against discrimination, non-tolerance and promoting the principles of multiculturalism and social inclusion. Positive public statements can be extraordinarily powerful and send a vital symbolic message to the community that non-tolerance and discrimination is never acceptable.

OSCE/ODIHR:

- Develop analytically rigorous studies on possible relations between hate crimes and manifestations of intolerance and discrimination in public discourse;
- Develop, in cooperation with the Representative of Freedom of Media, tools and materials to support the efforts of media professionals in developing and adopting voluntary codes of conduct, self-regulatory mechanisms and other appropriate steps in order to ensure fair portrayal of individuals and groups in societies;

- Design guidelines and compile examples of good practices to combat manifestations of Islamophobia in political discourse, including the media and political speech;
- Support civil society in monitoring, reporting on and countering discriminatory speech in the media including on the Internet, in particular through monitoring and reporting of Islamophobic speech;
- ODIHR to organize training courses for civil servants, media and NGO representatives and representatives of different religious and ethnic groups.
- ODIHR to observe closely the process of combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, as well as the Freedom of Religion of Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries;

Office of the Grand Mufti of the Muslims in Bulgaria