



Forum 18 <http://www.forum18.org>

*The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief*

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Session 7: Strategies for promoting tolerance and understanding, inter-ethnic and intercultural dialogue, including its religious dimension, in the OSCE area

The OSCE is a security organisation. As OSCE Chair-in-Office Foreign Minister Kanat Saudabayev said at the 20th anniversary of the Copenhagen Document, "respect for and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, the development of democracy, combating intolerance and discrimination, are integral parts of a unified and indivisible security." We can all fully agree with these words, as the intention behind OSCE commitments and their implementation is to create a comprehensive framework for peace and stability - and we can see in Kyrgyzstan why such a framework is necessary.

There are many dimensions to the crisis in Kyrgyzstan. But a vital component of resolving that crisis - and indeed resolving and defusing other points of tension in the OSCE region - is the human dimension. As the ODIHR has noted, "no government can claim they have to establish political or economic security before addressing human rights and democracy".

Since former President Bakiev took power in 2005, there was a pattern of systematic violations of Kyrgyzstan's commitments to implement freedom of religion or belief for all along with other fundamental human rights such as the freedoms of expression and of peaceful assembly. In 2005 both registered and unregistered religious communities were able to function freely, but Bakiev's government imposed increasing state controls on all religious activity and was planning further legislative restrictions up to the point it lost power. It showed little sign of understanding that genuine security depends on genuine respect for human rights. This had damaging consequences; as a Baha'i put it: "Our country has so many urgent problems - poverty, the lack of medicine, AIDS, crime, corruption. Why don't officials work on these instead of making life harder for religious believers?"

Lack of implementation of OSCE commitments has contributed to making the current situation difficult to resolve peacefully. A new report "Broken Promises" - launched today by the Permanent Representation of the Netherlands to the OSCE, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights, Forum 18, the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and the Norwegian Mission to the East, with Kazakh civil society partners - notes the interconnections between respecting freedom of religion or belief and respecting other fundamental freedoms. This is illustrated by the findings of Kyrgyz NGO the Foundation for Tolerance International (FTI). Among FTI's findings is that ordinary Kyrgyz people think that - and I quote:

- repressions and terror implemented by the government are the main causes of the expression of violence on part of certain groups and individuals;
- and the authorities use terrorism as an excuse to carry out repression, knowingly exaggerating the threat of terrorism in order to divert public discontent from the actual causes of discontent to the issues of terrorism and extremism.

The relevance of these findings to Kyrgyzstan today - and to other participating States - is clear. Implementing the approach reflected in OSCE human dimension commitments - that security is far more than the absence of war and violence - has been shown, for example in the north of Ireland, to be a highly effective way of addressing the root causes of insecurity. So recommendations for participating States, as well as the OSCE institutionally and as whole could include:

- to affirm the dependence of genuine dialogue, understanding, tolerance and non-discrimination on effective protection for fundamental human rights and the rule of law;
- insisting that politically binding human dimension commitments are for implementation by all participating States;
- OSCE institutions and field operations mainstreaming freedom of religion or belief in human dimension work, taking full advantage of the ODIHR's expertise.

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