

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

2017 OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting – Working Session 7

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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 on-going 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.

Having said this, the situation of Christian communities across the OSCE region raises serious concerns and seems able to erode the social cohesion inside the participating States and the confidence between them. Threats and violent attacks against Christians, which can even result in the murder of individuals, are recurrent both East and West of Vienna, while profanation of Christian churches, cemeteries and other properties represents a daily reality in the entire OSCE area.

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. The majority of Anti-Semitic hate crimes and hate crimes motivated by religious bias or prejudice were committed against properties. Since in several jurisdictions crimes against property are considered less serious than those against persons, there is both the risk of under-reporting and reluctance to investigate and prosecute these crimes. Moreover, hate crimes committed against Christians seem to receive less attention because of Christianity's position as the historically major religion. Therefore, hate crimes against Christians are certainly more numerous than those indicated in the annual reporting of the ODIHR and deserve more attention.

The effects of this phenomenon cannot easily be overestimated: it may foster a climate of fear and intimidation, thereby threatening existing religious pluralism and undermining peace and stability in the whole OSCE area. Attending a church, as well a mosque or a synagogue, is not something superfluous to life, so doing so should not become an act of heroism: it is a fundamental freedom that should be guaranteed to everyone, everywhere.

In this respect I wish to recall that, in accordance with Ministerial Council Decision No. 3/13, participating States have already committed themselves to “endeavour to prevent and protect against attacks directed at persons or groups based on thought, conscience, religion or belief” and to “adopt policies to promote respect and protection for places of worship and religious sites, religious monuments, cemeteries and shrines against vandalism and destruction”. I would underline that I am not here talking about new commitments to be adopted, but rather about the implementation of those that all participating States have already agreed to undertake.

Therefore, in accordance with its feature as a security organization, the OSCE should develop specific initiatives pertaining to the protection of Christian communities, as the ODIHR has already done for the Jewish 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. Let me take this occasion to make a general remark on the fact that – especially after the transfer of the freedom of religion or belief portfolio to the Human Rights Department – a close cooperation among the ODIHR's departments is crucial in order to guarantee a comprehensive and coherent approach in protecting freedom of religion or belief and combating religious intolerance and discrimination.

Moreover, 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.