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**STATEMENT BY MR. SERGEY MELNIKOV,
EXECUTIVE SECRETARY OF THE COUNCIL ON INTERACTION
WITH RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATIONS UNDER THE OFFICE OF THE
PRESIDENT OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE
2010 OSCE REVIEW CONFERENCE**

Warsaw, 1 October 2010

**Working session 2: Fundamental freedoms I, including: freedom of
thought, conscience, religion or belief; presentation of activities of the
ODIHR and other OSCE institutions and field operations to implement
priorities and tasks contained in the OSCE decisions and other documents**

Mr. Chairperson,
Distinguished colleagues,

Allow me, first of all, on behalf of the Russian delegation to greet all the participants in our meeting.

The right of citizens to freedom of conscience and religious convictions is a universal humanitarian value, and the way that right is ensured is a gauge of the democratic nature and social maturity of the State.

Today in Russia, in our view, all the necessary conditions have been created for the exercise of the right to freedom of conscience and for successful activities by religious associations.

During the last 20 years the number of religious associations registered in the Russian Federation has increased five fold and now stands at nearly 23,500 organizations representing more than 60 confessions and denominations.

In accordance with the Constitution of our country, religious associations operate on the basis of the principle of legal equality.

In terms of the confidence they enjoy among the population, at the present time, according to data collected by sociologists, religious organizations hold leading positions, scoring ahead of other civil society institutions.

In modern Russia, as in the majority of European countries, religious associations are separate from the State. However, relationships of social partnership and co-operation in the most varied areas of service to society are developing between the State and the church.

Such institutions engaged in State-confessional dialogue as the Council on Interaction with Religious Associations under the Office of the President of the Russian Federation and the Commission of the Government of the Russian Federation on Religious Organizations are engaged in active work.

The scope of interaction between the State and religious organizations is a broad one. It includes spiritual and moral education and the enlightenment of the public, the prevention of xenophobia and discrimination on national or religious grounds, the strengthening of the institution of the family, and much else.

As you are aware, following an appeal by religious leaders of the country the President of Russia, Mr. Dmitry Medvedev, issued an order calling for the stage-by-stage introduction in the armed forces of the Russian Federation of the institution of army and navy religious practitioners, a ruling that is currently being implemented.

This marks a fundamentally important step in the development of State-confessional relations in the country, restoring what for the Russian military is the historically traditional co-operation between the military command and the church for the purpose of the spiritual and moral guidance of the armed forces and the satisfaction of the religious needs of devout servicemen and women.

The State Duma of Russia has adopted at its first reading a draft federal Law on the Restitution to Religious Organizations of Religious Property Owned by the State or Municipalities. In this way, the injustice committed by the State during the Soviet period, when the property of religious organizations was unlawfully taken from them, will be redressed.

It is quite natural that in this and other matters the State authorities are interacting, primarily, with the religious organizations that have the largest number of followers and that enjoy a strong position and authority in society, something that not infrequently leads to a certain amount of jealousy and incomprehension on the part of religious minorities. At the same time, this approach does not violate the principle of the legal equality of religious associations and is in conformity with the traditions of Europe, where in the majority of countries a practice has evolved providing for various degrees of co-operation between State institutions and religious organizations on the basis of their historical roots, membership and other social factors.

In recent years we in Russia, like all of Europe, have encountered an increase in ethno-confessional tension and the desire by certain forces to split society along religious or ethnic lines. In this context, those who espouse extremist ideas and views do not shrink from any means, including acts of terrorism directed against peaceful citizens and the murder of persons performing religious functions.

The roots of these crimes lie in intolerance towards persons holding other views and in a failure to respect their customs and traditions. Ignorance of the very bases of religious

culture makes human beings, and particularly young persons, vulnerable in the face of dangerous extremist currents.

In July of last year the heads of the religious confessions in the country proposed to the President of Russia that students attending schools that are part of the general education system be taught, as freely selected by their parents, one of three subjects: the bases of the traditional religions of Russia (Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism), the bases of world religions, or secular ethics. This form of instruction was introduced in schools in April 2010. More than 10,000 schools are participating in the project, with more than 230,000 children studying the subjects.

Measures of this kind help not only to head off ethno-religious conflicts but also to overcome other social ills confronting modern societies.

In conclusion, I must admit that, despite the substantial positive changes that have been achieved in the area of State-church relations, we, as in any country, face instances in which the existing legislation with regard to religious associations is violated and when local conflicts based on religion periodically flare up. At the same time, however, mechanisms have been created and are effectively functioning, including judicial mechanisms, for the protection of the religious rights and freedoms of the citizens and the prevention of discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation or convictions.

Thank you for your attention.