

Address by Ambassador Janez Lenarčič
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Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting

on

‘Freedom of Religion or Belief’

Neuer Saal, Hofburg, Vienna

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to this year's second Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting, on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

2009 marks twenty years since the adoption of the OSCE's Vienna Concluding Document -- a milestone text on freedom of religion or belief. Its importance is not limited to the OSCE context, but recognized in the broader international human rights framework. Almost three decades after its adoption, and two decades after the OSCE's landmark Vienna Document, the issue of freedom of religion or belief continues to be high on the agenda of participating States and civil society across the region.

Today's meeting is a testimony to this. I commend the OSCE Chairmanship for having chosen this important topic for a supplementary meeting. I would also like to thank the Personal Representatives of the CiO on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination, Rabbi Andrew Baker, Hon. Mario Mauro and Ambassador Adil Akhmetov, for their presence today -- Ambassador, I would also like to congratulate you on your recent appointment.

I appreciate the presence of a large number of distinguished participants at this meeting. I would like to particularly welcome the eminent academics and international experts, including members of the ODIHR's Advisory Panel on Freedom of Religion or Belief, representatives of civil society, members of religious or belief communities and associations, delegations of participating States, and representatives of OSCE field operations and institutions from different parts of the OSCE area who have come to discuss the implementation of OSCE commitments on freedom of religion or belief.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

This supplementary meeting is based on a solid set of OSCE commitments that since the Helsinki Final Act have bound participating States to respect freedom of conscience, thought, religion and belief, and their manifestation. These commitments are far-reaching and profound and have given substance to one of the paramount fundamental rights that is key to human development.

In the past years, our Organization has worked to strengthen adherence to freedom of religion and belief commitments. It has convened conferences, roundtables and other meetings. It has facilitated the creation of networks and the holding of discussions and debates. Guidelines, expertise, comments and books have been made available to the public. We have minutes of meetings, reports, studies and articles that we can refer to, experts that we can consult, practices we can suggest.

These efforts represent an investment that will not depreciate in the years ahead: We have at our disposal an enormous intellectual and human capital, which is essential in dealing with present and future challenges.

Some of these challenges are very present at the beginning of the 21st century: certain tensions and difficulties linked to religions and beliefs have come to the fore. Let me name some of those apparent tensions.

First, the relationship between freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief. Yet rather than presenting the relationship between those rights as conflictual, I prefer to view it as interdependent. Freedom of expression is essential not only to creating an environment where an open discussion can be held but also where religions or beliefs can flourish through a richer awareness of the contribution they can give to society.

Another apparent tension lies in the dichotomy between security and religion. We have, for instance, seen how ‘extremism laws’ are sometimes used to stifle the freedom to manifest one’s religion or belief. There can, in my mind, be no doubt that the promotion of freedom of religion or belief offers the best remedy to extremism, and adds an important safeguard to our collective security. Yet on the other hand, let me also emphasise that strong religious commitments do not necessarily have to be in contrast with the obligations of loyal and law abiding citizens. In other words: having obtained the status of a religious or belief community is not a license for disregarding the law.

So challenges arise when the commitments related to the right to freedom of religion or belief are not fully implemented, and when this freedom is limited as a consequence of lack of implementation. Unfortunately, this is still an issue in the OSCE area. Take the difficulty of some religious communities, especially minority ones, to establish places of worship; the violation of the right of religious communities to freely impart religious education to worshippers; the obstacles some individuals face when attempting to disseminate religious literature.

Another issue is the discrimination of some individuals and communities on the basis of religion or belief. This can emanate from State policies or the lack of appropriate accommodation of their needs.

Given these challenges, how do we make the best use of the stored capital we have accumulated over the years? I believe that we can do so by continuing to build on the significant *partnerships* with all the actors represented in this room today.

Firstly, the partnership between participating States — which bear the responsibility to implement their commitments -- and civil society for its key role in upholding the commitments. In the area of freedom of religion or belief, civil society advocates a pluralistic and very diverse set of ideas and values. It is significant that, despite their diverse outlook, the commitment to freedom of religion or belief presents a common denominator. In the OSCE’s history, civil society has played a fundamental role in bringing key issues to the attention of governments, in promoting freedom of religion or belief in agenda-setting, and in holding States accountable for the commitments they have undertaken.

We are pleased to have such broad representation not only from States but also from religious and belief communities. I also encourage participating States to look closely at the recommendations that emerged from the civil society meeting held this morning, of which we will hear later.

Second, the partnership established among international organisations active in the area. Our co-operation and partnership is continuous and very fruitful: together, we reinforce each other’s policies and actions, we learn from each other’s experience. I am very pleased that representatives of the Venice Commission and the European Commission against Racism and

Intolerance (ECRI) and other UN offices are present today. We also have excellent relations with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Third, the partnership of expertise, gathered under ODIHR's umbrella. The ODIHR Advisory Panel on Freedom of Religion or Belief, established in 1997, has greatly developed and proved to be a valuable tool to enhance religious or belief freedom, and has become a reference point for a larger community of experts and scholars in the OSCE area.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me finally stress the importance of today's discussion for the work of the ODIHR. The topics have been carefully chosen; we will proceed from discussing

- the implementation of OSCE commitments on freedom of religion or belief in the OSCE area, via
- the status of religious or belief communities; to
- places of worship.

I think that our discussion today and tomorrow will greatly benefit from the broad and pluralistic participation we have in this room. I am looking forward to the sessions.

I would now like to introduce the keynote speaker, Prof. Ombretta Fumagalli Carulli, Professor of Canon and Ecclesiastical Law at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan.