



Human Dimension Implementation Meeting ODIHR activities

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Working session 13 - Fundamental freedoms II

Including: Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief

Violations of freedom of religion or belief occur in many parts of the OSCE region. They include discrimination against individuals in the workplace and public services, defamation campaigns against minority religions or belief groups, the disruption or prohibition of worship even in private homes, and imprisonment of those who object to military service on religious grounds. State authorities often abuse registration of faith communities as a means of denying them and their members basic rights of freedom of religion or belief. In addition to this, infringements on freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, the right to change one's religion, and the right to produce or to have access to religious literature are common-place in large parts of the OSCE area.

ODIHR activities relating to this working session

Ever since the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief has been one of the core commitments that each of the OSCE's 56 participating States has agreed to respect. Over the past 30 years, these commitments have been considerably expanded (e.g. Vienna 1989; Copenhagen 1990). In its work, the ODIHR has access to the expertise provided by the ODIHR Advisory Panel of Experts on freedom of religion or belief. 32 participating States have delegated 60 individuals to serve on this Panel which is primarily an advisory and consultative body to highlight issues or trends that deserve attention.

The Panel unites eminent experts from different backgrounds and of various faiths. Their expertise is available to participating States, to OSCE field missions and to civil society stakeholders. The Panel has undertaken a number of activities, including:

- Legislative reviews for governments, on request, to help them bring their legislation in line with international standards, while fostering improved relations among religious groups;
- Publishing *Guidelines for Review of Legislation Pertaining to Religion or Belief*, which were drafted by members of the Panel of Experts in association with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission;
- Providing expert opinions on specific infringements of freedom of religion or belief to governments;
- Providing advice on freedom of religion or belief and related issues to the ODIHR;
- Developing training materials on issues pertaining to standards of international law on freedom of religion or belief; target groups of future trainings include faith communities, civil society, government officials, and academics.

At present, the Panel is advising on the drafting of legislation in half a dozen participating States, particularly on the issue of the status of religious communities. Its involvement in the drafting of legislation has so far been instrumental in improving draft laws, thus pre-empting future problems.