

Informal meeting of Ministers' Deputies 25 March 2021

Antisemitic, anti-Muslim and other forms of hate and intolerance online and offline: trends and counter strategies

Statement by Associate Professor Dr Regina Polak

Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, also focusing on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and Member of Other Religions

Transformation of Religion in the socioreligious field of Europe. Impact on the OSCE comprehensive Approach

Dear Mr. President, dear Mr. Holtgen, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for the invitation and the kind introduction.

Since the beginning of the millennium, the OSCE participating states committed themselves several times to the importance of multicultural and interreligious dialogue and its positive contribution to combating racism, xenophobia, discrimination, intolerance, and hate, including anti-Semitism and discrimination and intolerance against Christians, Muslims, and members of other religions. In the summary I provided you can find some exemplary statements. They stress the positive function of interreligious dialogue in creating better understanding among nations and peoples and underline the importance of active participation by States, governments, and civil society. They also highlight the importance of law enforcement, education and training programmes, data collection, raising public awareness, sharing best practices, respect for cultural and religious diversity and the promotion of respect for human rights – such as the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief. Also, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly commits to the importance of IRD and highlights the cooperation between States and civil society, NGOs and religious communities and religious leaders within the framework of an intercultural dialogue. In this context IRD aims at fostering a convergence on universally accepted democratic values and on the principles of freedom, equality and justice that should guide the construction of a social order which requires the contribution of all members of society. Multicultural and interreligious dialogue is therefore an integral and evolving part of the comprehensive concept of peace and security of the OSCE.

Social science studies prove the enormous positive impact of interreligious dialogue. However, they also demonstrate that positive effects depend on several factors, such as specific interests of political and religious actors, the relationship between religious communities and the cooperation between States, governments, civil society, and religious communities. Additionally, country-specific, religious-historical, and political circumstances shape the impact of IRD. It is also crucial whether dialogue is primarily conducted on the level of religious leaders and religious institutions or on the grassroots-level. Last but not least, the actual number of people with a religious self-understanding and practicing religion in a society as well as the status of religion in society play a decisive role. IRD thus has heterogeneous effects in European countries. It requires a well reflected framework and design in order to develop a positive effect on social cohesion, security, and peace.

From my perspective as a researcher, I will outline exemplary challenges for the IRD in Europe which is marked by a comprehensive transformation of the socio-religious field in Europe.

With regard to religion, Europe faces a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, individual religious self-images are eroding. In Western Europe traditional, church-related religion

evaporates while atheism as well as religious plurality dynamized by migration increase. In Eastern Europe, the number of people with a religious self-understanding increased after 1989, primarily as an identity marker in the context of nation-building but is now also decreasing significantly. Though these processes of ongoing secularization differ between European States – countries with a high number of individuals exercising their right to practice a religion such as Croatia, Poland or Romania, and low-level countries such as the Czech Republic, France and Northern European countries – a decline of individuals practising religion can be observed all over Europe.

On the other hand, on the level of public and political discourse the importance of religion has been increasing since 9/11, not least with a focus on the Muslim population. The awareness of the challenge to live together in the context of cultural and religious plurality has been rising, not at least accelerated through migration and the refugee crisis. This has led to severe societal and political tensions and even conflicts which are frequently linked to the abstract concepts of “religion” and “culture” as distinction markers.

In all European countries, Islam is regarded as the most threatening religion, with at least one third of the population feeling this way with a major negative impact on the right of persons practicing Islam to fully exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief. In the context of secular discourses this development leads to the problematization of “religion” as such. In some countries Jews, Christians and members of other religions experience intolerance and discrimination while exercising their right to practice religion and belief, needing to justify themselves. Consequently, the Cordoba Declaration by the Chairperson-in-Office of the OSCE stated already in 2005, that “international developments or political issues never justify racism, xenophobia, or discrimination, including against Muslims, Christians and members of other religions”. In Ljubljana 2005 also the identification of terrorism and violent extremism with any religion or belief, culture, ethnic group, or race was rejected.

This paradox situation becomes visible in several problems:

1) Intolerance, discrimination, and racism, including hate-crimes on grounds of faith and belief are a serious danger. The latest “OSCE-Human Dimension Commitments and State Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic” underscores wider trends of these phenomena. Also, the OSCE-ODIHR Hate-Crime Reporting 2019 documents data on hate-crimes based on grounds of religion and belief against Jews, Muslims, Christians and members of other religions. Consequently, the OSCE has set a comprehensive focus in combating hate-crimes under the current Swedish chairpersonship with ODIHR providing tools such as trainings, document collections and fact sheets on hate crimes (cf. summary).

2) In some countries, people practising religion are being suspected of endangering democracy by a growing non-religious population. This favors attitudes of banning public practising of religion as well as stigmatizing religious practices and results in an erosion of the right to religious freedom and belief, which affects Jews, Muslims, Christians, and members of other religions.

3) An evaporating, a culturally disembedded individual religious self-understanding can become an object to political instrumentalization and strengthen antidemocratic values. For example, in Western Europe a significant quantity of persons can be observed reformatting their Christian identity as a cultural identity marker excluding cultural and religious minorities, especially Muslims. In Eastern Europe, an individual religious self-understanding is more linked with national attitudes. Also, the increase of fundamentalism and religiously motivated extremism can be observed as a consequence of an individual religious self-understanding that has been stripped of its roots in education, tradition, and everyday life.

However, an individual religious self-understanding has a twofold impact on these developments. For instance, an individual religious self-understanding unfolds effects that endanger democracy in connection with authoritarian attitudes or low socio-economic status

and living in rural regions. Conversely, an individual religious self-understanding in combination with social engagement is significantly linked with attitudes that promote democracy and strengthen social capital and solidarity. Moreover, a lack of religious education paves way for fundamentalist or extremist tendencies.

In this conflictive field, interreligious dialogue has to position itself today and is more important than ever. The comprehensive approach of the OSCE combats intolerance, racism, and discrimination on the basis of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law and at the same time promotes coexistence in diversity with numerous projects (I can present two in the discussion). As the OSCE-SHDM Meeting on Freedom of Religion and Belief stated: “A State cannot create and sustain a culture of respect for diversity only by itself. Religious or belief communities, civil society organizations, including faith-based and other organizations, [...] all have an important role to play as part of comprehensive efforts to address intolerance and discrimination, including racism and xenophobia.” At the same time, new challenges are emerging:

1) Europe faces the challenge of multiple pluralism. To this end, the dialogue between states, governments and religious organisations must be intensified. Interreligious dialogue, however, should also be promoted between religious communities in civil society and with the secular society, e.g., with people who share other than religious worldviews. IRD is thus an integral part of a comprehensive intercultural dialogue. This requires national and international programs, research, and media-work to raise the public awareness. A special focus should be put on religious education in various forms as a profound antidote to extremism.

2) Interreligious dialogue cannot solve political problems, but can make important contributions, as it opens up communication platforms in which religiously and culturally different people discuss problems from multiple perspectives and learn to live together in diversity. It can also support peace processes and cooperate in important issues such as promoting human rights, combating violence against women, or combating terrorism.

3) Interreligious dialogue must consider the social and political distortions and contradictions in which it takes place, including power relations, legal frameworks, culturally dominant narratives, historical inheritances, political interests. Dialogue takes place in societies with a lot of contradictions, e.g., in countries which Christians are the majority and at the same time experience discrimination – a situation, for which there is massive lack of research. It is therefore important to transparently clarify the interests, goals, and addressees of the IRD and develop ethic-based rules of dialogue. From the OSCE-perspective not religion as such, but the rights of the individuals, groups, and communities to exercise the right to freedom of religion or belief are at the centre of the IRD. This human rights approach, together with democracy and the rule of law, lies at the core of the comprehensive concept of security of the OSCE.

4) A comprehensive approach to the IRD includes its promotion at all levels. It comprises the regular dialogue and cooperation with the main religious organizations in Europe and the dialogue between and with religious leaders. However, civil society cooperation between religious communities and secular institutions in the interests of the common good and dialogue on the everyday level should also be promoted.

5) Last but not least, I would like to emphasize the role and importance of women in interreligious dialogue who do outstanding, often invisible work, especially on the civil society and daily life level.

Thanks to the support of the IRD by international organizations such as the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the European Union, there are excellent concepts and good practice models for the IRD in numerous European countries today. To cooperate for the further development of the structural framework and conditions of the IRD and to promote national and international cooperation is a worthwhile endeavor for a safe and peaceful Europe.

Appendix

OSCE Commitments related to Interfaith and interreligious dialogue (selection)

The OSCE's comprehensive approach to security (includes) is based upon a rights perspective and recognizes freedom of religion or belief and the security objective as complementary, interdependent, and mutually reinforcing objectives. As such, human rights, together with democracy and the rule of law, lie at the core of the comprehensive concept of security. The OSCE's commitments in this field are extensive and reflect human rights law. Further, a human rights approach is entrenched in the larger body of OSCE commitments, measures and action. It is grounded in the notion that all participating States bear the primary responsibility to guarantee rights of individuals on an equal basis for everyone within their jurisdictions. ([Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security: Policy Guidance | OSCE](#))

Porto 2002, Decision No. 6 on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination (MC (10). DEC/6)

“The Ministerial Council, (...) Recalling the continuing work of the OSCE structures and institutions in the field of promoting human rights, tolerance, non-discrimination and multiculturalism, in particular by the human dimension meetings and activities, projects and programmes including those of participating States, stressing the positive role of multicultural and inter-religious dialogue in creating better understanding among nations and peoples, (...) Recognizing the responsibility of participating States for promoting tolerance and non-discrimination, (...) Undertakes to further promote multicultural, interethnic and inter-religious dialogue in which governments and civil society will be encouraged to participate actively.”

Ljubljana 2005, Decision No. 10/05 on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination: Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding (MC.DEC/10/05 of 6 December 2005)

“The Ministerial Council, (...) Recalling the importance of promoting and facilitating intercultural and inter-faith dialogue and partnerships aimed at tolerance, mutual respect and understanding, at both the national and the international levels, (...) Decides that the participating States while implementing their commitments to promote tolerance and non-discrimination will focus their activities in such fields as, inter alia, legislation, law enforcement, education, media, data collection, migration and integration, religious freedom, inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue”

“rejects the identification of terrorism and violent extremism with any religion or belief, culture, ethnic group, nationality or race.”

Cordoba Declaration by the Chairman-in-Office 2005

“International developments or political issues never justify racism, xenophobia, or discrimination, including against Muslims, Christians and members of other religions”

Basel 2014, Declaration on Enhancing Efforts to Combat Anti-Semitism (MC.DOC/8/14 of 5 December 2014)

“We call upon the participating States to (...) Promote and facilitate open and transparent intercultural, interfaith and interreligious dialogue and partnerships; (...)”

Basel 2014, Declaration on Co-Operation with the Mediterranean Partners (MC.DOC/9/14 of 5 December 2014)

“We also call for strengthened dialogue and co-operation with Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation with regard to ensuring the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, preventing intolerance, xenophobia, violence and discrimination on the basis of religion or belief, including against Christians, Muslims, Jews and members of other religions, as well as against non-believers, promoting interfaith and intercultural dialogue, combating intolerance and discrimination against individuals or religious or belief communities, and promoting respect and protection for places of worship and religious sites, religious monuments, cemeteries and shrines, against vandalism and destruction.”

Oslo 2010, Resolution on the OSCE's Commitment in Favour of Religious Freedom and the Separation between Religious Communities and the State

“The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (...) Calls on political and academic institutions, civil society and religious faiths, in line with the contents of the OSCE Decision on “Tolerance and Non-Discrimination: Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding” (30/11/2007), to ensure that the individuals and communities involved establish the necessary inter-faith dialogue in order to foster, within the framework of an intercultural dialogue, a convergence on universally accepted democratic values and on the principles of freedom, equality and justice that should guide the construction of a social order that requires the contribution of all members of society.”

Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Freedom of Religion or Belief: the Role of Digital Technologies and Civil Society actors In Advancing This Human Right For All, 9-10 November 2020 (online), ANNOTATED AGENDA.

“A State cannot create and sustain a culture of respect for diversity only by itself. Religious or belief communities, civil society organizations, including faith-based and other organizations, [...] all have an important role to play as part of comprehensive efforts to address intolerance and discrimination, including racism and xenophobia.”

OSCE

OSCE-Human Dimension Commitments and State Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic:

[ODIHR on states of emergency, Covid-19, democracy & human rights | OSCE](#)

OCSE/ODIHR Hate-Crime Reporting 2019: [OSCE - ODIHR | Hate Crime Reporting](#)

OSCE/ODIHR Fact Sheets : [Hate Crime Factsheets | OSCE](#)

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