



**Christian Solidarity Worldwide
Voice for the Voiceless**

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**Working Session 4: Fundamental Freedoms – Freedom of thought, conscience,
religion or belief**

I am speaking on behalf of CSW, a Christian human rights NGO working for freedom of thought, religion and belief for all and as member of European Platform on Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID), a loose coalition of NGOs and faith groups, seeking to influence EU on how it addresses, in policy and practice, violations of freedom of thought and belief specifically in third countries

As Ambassador Strohal has mentioned previously “the freedom of religion is a fundamental human right”. Freedom of thought and belief is not only a fundamental human right it is also a litmus test for the overall status of human rights in a country. Unfortunately many OSCE participating states continue to violate freedom of thought and belief, most notably Uzbekistan.

In Uzbekistan the government has a highly restrictive law on religion which severely limits the freedom of thought and belief of all religious communities and the government controls practices of religious communities especially the majority Muslim community.

Christians and other faith groups engaged in ‘illegal’ (or legal) religious activities can face any of the following violations

- fines
- loss of employment
- confiscation of property
- arbitrary arrests
- detention
- torture
- deportations
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Religious services are frequently raided by the security officials and those present are subjected to interrogation and harassment and verbal or physical threats. Often the officials will also video the proceedings and confiscate any religious materials they discover. Those detained are frequently tortured and maltreated. People known to be active in religious communities are registered with the local security agencies and can be summoned at any moment for interrogation.

Religious literature has been confiscated and places of worship have been closed or demolished.

The so-called unregistered groups face particularly harsh treatment. It is illegal for unregistered religious groups to hold public or private meetings, to establish a church, to disseminate religious materials or proselytize. Foreign missionary activity and foreign religious organisations are prohibited.

Recently, Protestant pastor Dimitry Shestakov was sentenced to four years imprisonment in an harsh work camp merely for practising his belief and leading a congregation of the Full Gospel Church in Andijan. Pastor Shestakov is one of a number of prisoners of conscience currently imprisoned in Uzbekistan.

The overall human rights situation in Uzbekistan continues to deteriorate rapidly and so far the Uzbek government has ignored all protests by foreign governments and international bodies which include limited EU sanctions following the Andijan massacre.

We ask that the OSCE participating States and institutions continue raise the following concerns and human rights benchmarks in their discussions and that EU member states in particular will keep these issues in mind when discussing the renewal of EU sanctions on Uzbekistan and in EU Uzbek human rights dialogues.

Recommendations include

- ensure that freedom of thought, religion and belief is respected in both law and practice according to Uzbekistan's OSCE and international commitments;
- ensure that OSCE offices and participating states closely monitor the developments in Uzbekistan
- ask the OSCE Advisory Council on Freedom of Religion or Belief to examine the situation at the earliest opportunity and to produce report and recommendations on the way forward in promoting freedom of thought and belief in Uzbekistan.
- end of repression and release of all prisoners of conscience such as human rights defenders, independent journalists and members of Muslim and Christian communities imprisoned for their belief;
- end of torture and implementation of recommendations made by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture;
- creating space for civil society and allowing local and international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) to operate freely;

The situation in Turkmenistan is also problematic. There is also a strict government control of all faith communities. The laws of the state violate both international and OSCE commitments and faith communities face repression from government and local security officials. The newly appointed President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov has taken some small steps to address some of his predecessor's more extreme proclamations but the human rights situation has

remained largely unchanged and the religious freedom situation has significantly deteriorated since beginning of the year. Congregations have been raided, religious believers have faced harassment and threats and some have been imprisoned or deported reminiscent of the worst period of persecution from 1997 to 2003. On May 14 the government sentenced a Baptist leader Pastor Kalataevsky to three years imprisonment in a labour camp. Pastor Kalataevsky is transferred to the harsher labour camp in Seydi which is infamous for its treatment of prisoners of conscious. As one Turkmen source stated : ***“It seems the bad times are coming back”***.

There has been some concern that discussing such violations of freedom of thought and belief under the umbrella of tolerance and discrimination does not fully address the issue. Of course the rights-based approach and the tolerance-based approach are both vital aspects of a holistic approach in an attempt to ensure freedom of thought and belief. However it is impossible to build tolerance where faith communities face harassment, imprisonment and torture for practising their belief.

At the Bucharest High Level Conference on Combating Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding OSCE was encouraged to adopt a holistic approach, to strengthen the rights based approach and to seriously address freedom of thought and belief both as part of the human rights department as well within its tolerance programmes.

Additionally, there has been a growing interest and engagement on the part of EU in OSCE areas such as Central Asia. EU has recently produced a new strategy on Central Asia where EU commits itself amongst other things to ***“promote dialogue within civil society and respect for freedom of religion”***. Central Asia is an area where OSCE has particular expertise and experience not to mention a strong practical presence on the ground.

- In light of the new EU strategy on Central Asia, EU and OSCE and its member states should strive to strengthen and develop further the co-operation between to the two institutions.
- To ensure that any action plans on the implementation of the EU Central Asia strategy should be guided by OSCE working principles and incorporate existing OSCE commitments in the field of all human rights including freedom of thought, conscience and belief.
- To promote complementarity of policies especially in the field of human rights.
- To ask the OSCE Advisory Council on Freedom of Religion or Belief to produce policy paper on practical ways in which EU could *promote dialogue with civil society and respect for freedom of religion* in the context of the Central Asia Strategy.

We hope that OSCE and its participating states will continue to devote their efforts and resources to ensure that freedom of thought and belief as enshrined

in the Helsinki Final Act and subsequent declarations will be respected by all OSCE participating states.

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