

Testimony to the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Mario Mauro

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

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me thank you for the invitation to address such a distinguished audience. Today's hearing should be seen in the framework of the continuous leadership of the USA and, in particular, of the US Helsinki Commission on issues related to tolerance and non-discrimination in the OSCE. In this regard, it seems to me symbolic that I am here together with Ambassador Ahmetov and Rabbi Baker for the first joint country visit of the three OSCE Personal Representatives (PRs) on Tolerance issues.

As you are aware of, my mandate is broad. It covers two areas: Racism and Xenophobia, including specific challenges faced by Roma and Sinti, and Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and members of other religions. In the limited time available I will mention both issues. I will highlight current trends, successes and positive aspects, as well as the challenges ahead.

Racism and Xenophobia

Since my appointment as Personal Representative, we have witnessed an unprecedented collapse of the global economy which has affected all societies across OSCE region. However, some groups have felt the impact of the economic collapse much harder than other. Due to their already vulnerable position, the effects of the economic crisis on migrants, refugees and minority groups within the OSCE region were especially harsh and have contributed to worsening their already unstable situation.

In a depressed economy, migrants or minority groups are seen by the majority as competitors for jobs and social services and thus as a threat to their livelihoods or standard of living. This results in labelling minority group members as a burden to society.

When such discourse is prevalent, it can lead to an increase in racist and xenophobic rhetoric. Such accusations can in return lead to increased racist sentiments and can worsen the social exclusion of migrants and minorities.

Additionally, the lack of leadership of mainstream political parties throughout the region in highlighting the positive contribution of migrants to national and local economies and to essential maintenance of their societies' infrastructures is also a matter of concern. Such attitude at best acts as a barrier to the full participation of migrants and minority groups in societies. It also gives implicit condolence to the acts of discrimination and hatred towards migrants and their families.

Accounts of such attitudes and incidents can be found in various reports including the ODIHR Annual Report on Hate Crimes in the OSCE Region. In this regard, I wish to stress that ODIHR's report reveals that even if hate crimes and incidents based on racism and xenophobia are widespread throughout the OSCE region, there is no comprehensive and reliable data on the phenomenon. For example, only 15 participating have to this day sent to ODIHR official information on hate crimes based on racism and xenophobia during 2008. (It is important to stress that the data gathered by the FBI will be available later this year). This shows that participating States are, in this regard, not living up to their commitments. And we all know that if States want to devise effective policies, they need comprehensive and reliable data.

Roma and Sinti

The situation looks even worse with regards to Roma. Only one participating State, Sweden, has sent official data on hate crimes against Roma. At the same time, we know that the past years have seen a rise in manifestations of intolerance and violence against Roma in several OSCE participating States. Reported incidents of violence, including those resulting in deaths, seem to be not isolated cases but signal a worrying trend. The violence against Roma and Sinti takes place in an environment of open anti-Roma hate-speech, somehow tolerated or unabated by the mainstream. Such rhetoric garnishes public support, especially during electoral campaigns.

ODIHR's Status Report on the Implementation of the Action Plan on Improving the Situation on Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area was issued last year- it elaborates on the progress made thus far, and on the remaining challenges confronting pS as regards to fulfilling their commitments towards Roma and Sinti – it also identified the negative trends in a number of areas, and an increasing gap between the Roma population and the majority, in fields such as education, housing and employment.

The report also points to the challenges of discrimination, marginalization and segregation which still prevail for Roma and Sinti children when they enrol in local school systems. Recognizing the importance of early education as an instrument for preventing social exclusion and marginalization, and for effecting a long-term improvement in the situation of Roma and Sinti, the Ministerial Council last year adopted a decision on Enhancing OSCE Efforts to Implement the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area.

There are many problems inhibiting effective responses to racism and xenophobia. Amongst the most prominent ones are institutional barriers and challenges, which can sometimes impede positive policies and good intentions. Worse still, in some countries it is the state policy that institutionalises racism and discrimination.

In such cases, seemingly neutral policies or legislation have discriminatory effects on certain groups of population, who are often already marginalised or socially excluded. Situation of Roma and Sinti in many OSCE pS is provides an illustration of this worrying trend.

Another example of institutional racism is the policy of ethnic or racial profiling by law enforcement agencies. Examples of such practice have been well documented by non-governmental as well as inter-governmental organisations in a large number of OSCE pS and it is safe to say that no country has a clean record in this regard.

Despite a number of good practices and initiatives aimed at addressing the root causes and effects of racism and xenophobia implemented across the OSCE, there still remains a worrying gap between the politically binding human dimension commitments and the actual implementation of these commitments across much of the OSCE region.

A strong and unequivocal stance against racism and xenophobia, including anti-Roma hatred and violence is urgently needed. States and relevant stakeholders must unite in their efforts and use all existing frameworks and resources to combat such phenomena and prevent further escalation of violence against those vulnerable groups of the population.

Intolerance against Christians and members of other religions

Since in December 2004, the Bulgarian OSCE Chairmanship appointed a Personal Representative on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, also focusing on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and Members of Other Religions, a number of OSCE tolerance-related decisions and declarations were adopted, which included specific commitments and references to the fight against prejudice, intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions.

It is important to recall that these commitments are based on and reflect a dual approach defined by the participating States: defining and devising policies that guarantee the principle of equality and fight all forms of intolerance - addressing broad concepts like racism and intolerance in societies - while at the same recognizing the specificities of different forms of intolerance such as intolerance against Christians and members of other religions.

I believe that more than any other, the mandate of the Personal Representative on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, also focusing on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and Members of Other Religions encapsulates this concept well, both in terms of opportunities and challenges deriving from it.

One example of the complexities and challenges faced is the increasing “racialization of religion”, which reflects the complex relationship between race and religion and their public perception. The concept suggests that a racial connotation can be extended to a religion, a religious group, or a belief system, although its adherents may include people of many races.

Regarding intolerance and discrimination against Christians, I am pleased to report that the first event entirely devoted to intolerance and discrimination against Christians was held in Vienna 2009, when ODIHR hosted a roundtable on this topic. The roundtable attracted more than one hundred participants, including many representatives of religious communities, experts and researchers in the OSCE area.

This is a testimony to the fact that the OSCE offers a unique forum to address these issues; unique - firstly, because of the specificity of the commitments; and secondly, because of the OSCE's inclusive geographical scope.

The roundtable provided a platform to discuss and better understand the nature and scope of the problem, the study of which had been limited and is now considered by many to be in its conceptual and defining stages. The roundtable concluded that intolerance against Christians is manifested in various forms throughout the OSCE region and called for improved collection of data on intolerance and discrimination against Christians.

This is all the more evident when one looks at the data provided by this year's Hate Crimes Report prepared by ODIHR: only three participating States submitted information and statistics to ODIHR on intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions.

Nonetheless, religious communities and civil society reported episodes of vandalism and violent acts directed at Christians and their properties, including places of worship and cemeteries. Desecration of places of worship seems to be a particularly common feature of intolerance and discrimination against Christians in many parts of the OSCE area, including Western Europe, the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

Episodes of intolerance and discrimination committed against members of other religions, such as the Sikh community were also reported.

In some parts of the OSCE area, Christian churches and members of other religions face very basic problems, such as the prohibition of acquiring legal status, praying

freely and disseminating literature. It is important to focus on this issue as intolerance and discrimination of religious communities is closely linked to their limitations of freedom of religion or belief.

In this context, I would like to commend the United States for collecting comprehensive and disaggregated data on hate crimes against Christians and members of other religions.