



United States Mission to the OSCE

Session III: National, regional and international initiatives to promote inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue and civil society partnerships

As prepared for delivery by Knox Thames, U.S. Helsinki Commission
at the OSCE Tolerance Implementation Meeting
on Promoting Inter-Cultural, Inter-Religious and Inter-Ethnic Understanding,
Almaty, June 13, 2006

Madam Moderator, members of the diplomatic corps, and friends.

Dialogue is a key element in building trust between different ethnic and religious communities, and between such groups and governments at all levels. The United States therefore welcomes this session and hopes to learn about some of the tools used by other participating States to promote dialogue and partner with the non-governmental sector. At a time when some OSCE countries are pressuring some NGOs to close or curtail their activities, the U.S. is pleased that we are focusing on how to promote inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue through civil society partnerships.

I want to highlight the efforts of three organizations which warrant special attention for their work in the Balkans. The conflicts associated with Yugoslavia's demise throughout the 1990s had numerous causes; a contributing factor was a lack of genuine reconciliation between peoples following World War II. To achieve a fuller reconciliation between neighboring peoples that is essential for true peace and stability, a myriad of efforts – international, governmental and non-governmental alike – is critical.

The work of the U.S. Institute of Peace and the Project on Ethnic Relations has been comprehensive in this regard, bringing together people from Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and other countries that otherwise might not have the opportunity, or the political will, to meet and discuss issues of common concern. These topics can be broad, such as education and local governance, but they also look for practical, confidence-building steps.

It is also worth highlighting two additional issues relating to the Balkans. One is justice – people cannot move forward until past chapters have begun to be closed. In this regard, the work of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia is vital and the apprehension and transfer to The Hague of Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic remain critical to reconciliation. Justice provides both a degree of satisfaction to victims as well as a deterrent example to those wanting revenge.

A second issue of importance is the ongoing effort to identify the missing. The existence of large numbers of missing persons remains a significant impediment to post-conflict institution-building, peace initiatives and reconciliation, particularly in Kosovo but also in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Noteworthy is the constructive, effective work done in the Balkans

by the International Commission on Missing Persons. Even when the Commission's work merely confirms the suspected fate of a missing loved one, it nevertheless provides some closure and can contribute to the healing process.

Clearly, non-governmental organizations and religious communities can play valuable and unique roles in fostering reconciliation and understanding. Accordingly, governments should seek to facilitate the work of such groups. Unfortunately, some participating States pursue policies that intentionally impede the normal functioning of civil society, treating NGOs as pariahs instead of partners.

A troubling trend in recent years has been a push by some participating States to devise new religion laws with discriminatory elements. Serbia recently passed the Law on Churches and Religious Communities that blatantly discriminates against most religious communities by forcing all but seven to re-register with the government. Similarly, the draft religion law in Romania, if passed, would create one of the highest and most discriminatory registration requirements of any of the 55 OSCE States.

Similar shortcomings can be found elsewhere within Europe. For instance, the Czech Republic, Austria and Slovakia continue to maintain burdensome and disproportionate registration systems for religious communities, creating the appearance of second-class status for certain minority groups. Muslims and other religious communities must also deal with limitations on expression, such as clothing bans instituted in Germany and Turkey, and bans on conspicuous religious symbols in public schools in France. Many Turkish religious groups are affected by the systematic expropriation of their properties by the state without compensation, as well as roadblocks against peaceful religious meetings in private homes.

Particularly disturbing are intolerant and oppressive policies against non-governmental organizations and religious groups in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Belarus. The Russian NGO law and the Kazakh national security amendments which have potentially intrusive and restrictive effects on religious groups remain problematic and we continue to monitor implementation of these measures closely, especially in light of relevant OSCE commitments. Considering Kazakhstan sought to host this meeting, recent statements and actions by local Kazakh authorities regarding a Hare Krishna community outside of Almaty and actions to penalize minority religious communities for unregistered religious practice are not in harmony with this conference and the aims of OSCE. We would therefore welcome any oversight by federal authorities in assisting local officials in understanding their international obligations.

In closing, Madam Moderator, the United States wishes to reiterate its commitment to inter-cultural, inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue through civil society partnerships and thank you for the opportunity to speak.