



**OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)  
Regional workshop on responding to anti-Christian hate crimes  
and addressing the security needs of Christian communities**

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Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to be here today to represent COMECE (the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union). I would like to thank the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights for the kind invitation, which allows my organisation to express some thoughts and proposals on a topic that is becoming more and more relevant in Europe.

Just a few words on COMECE, which is the official representation of EU-based Catholic Bishops' Conferences vis-à-vis the European Union institutions. As COMECE, we do not focus on data collection, but rather on advocacy, proposing policy and legislative recommendations, primarily addressed to the EU institutions. Other actors already cover the data collecting aspect in an excellent manner and we will hear about it tomorrow.

COMECE greatly appreciates the work being carried out at the OSCE level on anti-Christian hatred and often refers the EU institutions to the recent Practical Guide *Understanding Anti-Christian Hate Crimes and Addressing the Security Needs of Christian Communities*, as an institutional best practice that should encourage an equally proactive approach at the European Union level.

With my intervention, I would like to propose to you some more general remarks, as well as some more specific recommendations.

First of all, the issue we are discussing today is a fundamental rights issue. Bearing this in mind, we welcome the efforts made to overcome some tendencies to address policies on the basis of the 'minorities versus majorities' dynamic. At times, we still notice that the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, as well as policies to counter hatred against religious communities, are seen as mainly pertaining to 'religious minorities'. For COMECE it is essential to provide tools of protection from discrimination, hate speech and hate crimes for the faithful and the sacred places of religious denominations, regardless of whether they belong to a 'majority' or a 'minority'.

The second point I would like to highlight, is that support for initiatives to counter anti-Christian hatred does not mean, at all, to question or not to acknowledge the specificity of other religious communities, in particular of Jewish and Muslim communities. This element is constantly recalled by COMECE when advocating on the matter at the EU level. Precisely due to this aspect of 'specificity' of different religious denominations, we do not recommend foreseeing one, single Coordinator, contact point or other office devoted to all religions without distinction. This also considering that such instruments normally suffer from limited resources.

From my perspective, it is also important to 'de-politicise' the issue of protection of Christians from hate crimes, which should be a concern for all and should have no political colour.

On a terminological level, COMECE supports the term 'anti-Christian hatred' rather than 'Christianophobia'. The reference to hatred, from a technical point of view, is more appropriate and is also in line with the approach adopted by the European Commission for tools related to other religious communities. Furthermore, the term 'phobia' shifts and somehow circumscribes the problem to an irrational/pathological level.

At the EU level we see some positive signs. The new EU counter-terrorism agenda underlines that "*protecting all faith communities from hatred, discrimination and violence remains a core European commitment*". Protection of places of worship '*of all faiths*' is also included in this new Agenda, with a well-developed section dedicated to the issue.

However, I would like to underline three points for the national level, taking inspiration from the EU context:

1. The close link of policies to protect places of worship with the exercise of freedom of religion. At the EU level we notice a reluctance to showcase this connection. Protecting places of worship is important not just for security reasons or for their symbolic value, but especially in view of safeguarding the places where primarily,

freedom of religion, is exercised. In this sense we support the reference included in the preparatory materials for this Regional workshop to the fact that security concerns arising from incidents against Christians can have particularly harmful effects on the collective exercise of freedom of religion or belief

2. Adopting a broad scope of action, as safety of places of worship should not be reduced to acts of terrorism, but also cover other types of attacks against places of worship (instances of vandalism, violence, profanations, disruptions of assemblies, defacing, arson, harassment)
3. Preserving the open, accessible and welcoming nature of places of worship in the context of security measures, avoiding a 'securitisation of worship': maximum fruition is crucial for places of worship.

As some of you know, COMECE is advocating for the appointment of an EU Coordinator to combat anti-Christian hatred in the Union. The European Parliament in a recent Resolution has called for such a position to be established at the EU level. Similar positions would be extremely useful at the national level too. Additionally, governments can also play a role in encouraging the European Commission to take a step towards the appointment.

A stronger cooperation with authorities, and their effectiveness in preventing and responding, also goes through having well-trained, dedicated officers.

When it comes to the national level, we would also call for the inclusion of local Churches in the relevant national processes as primary stakeholders: they should be fully involved in the elaboration and implementation of comprehensive national strategies/action plans to address the matter, mirroring the close cooperation adopted with targeted stakeholders, for instance, in addressing other issues related to the areas of non-discrimination and hate speech/hate crimes.

Creative public funding is another relevant element. At the EU level there are good examples concerning funding for protection of places of worship (which is a good practice to be multiplied at the national level). However, funding at the national level for initiatives to counter anti-Christian hatred are important beyond protection of places of worship. This especially considering that, at the EU level, funding for initiatives to counter anti-Christian hatred is currently lacking.

I would also like to briefly respond to the stimulating question circulated by our distinguished Moderator, on the steps to reduce hate crimes and increase the security of Christian communities.

Dialogue and education - providing the knowledge, but also the critical spirit so sorely needed nowadays - can of course contribute to the process. Combating religious illiteracy in society - and sometimes in public authorities - is paramount. However, this alone cannot be sufficient: we also need deterrence, measures of protection and effective policies to promote reporting. There is also a proportional relationship between addressing and reducing anti-Christian hate crimes and a solid protection of freedom of religion in Europe. A strong protection of freedom of religion can create a dissuasive context for potential offenders. In general, the presence of different instruments and measures to address the matter can also have a deterrent effect.

In conclusion, let me stress again that we need signals that the theme of anti-Christian hatred is taken on board by public authorities. At the OSCE level this is being done and we hope that as many States as possible - and the EU institutions - will take inspiration, bearing in mind that the idea that "It's ok to hate Christians" should have no place in Europe.

Thank you for your kind attention!