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Opening remarks to the Consultation on the Draft Toolkit on FoRB and Interreligious and Interfaith Dialogue and Partnership (IIDP). Principles for international cooperation on interreligious dialogue. The OSCE laboratory

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Introduction

A unique laboratory of international cooperation on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), the OSCE is also a laboratory of international cooperation on interreligious dialogue as both a condition and an outcome of freedom of religion or belief.

This short note aims at summarising guiding principles for the encounter of theories and practices of interreligious dialogue on the one hand and the protection and promotion of FoRB on the other, as they result from references to interreligious dialogue (as variously formulated) in OSCE documents and OSCE sources on FoRB.

The summary stems from the work of the author as a member of the OSCE-ODIHR panel of experts on FoRB from 2016 to 2022. A part of such work, conducted in collaboration with fellow members of the panel, was incorporated under the supervision of the senior advisor Kishan Manocha in the OSCE-ODIHR 2019 Policy Guidance on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security, which contains several references to «interfaith and interreligious dialogue and



partnerships», in particular at nn, 3 and 4 of the «guiding principles», as well as to the relevant OSCE documents in the footnotes 86, 87 and 88.

Principles

As we come to the principles which can be drawn from OSCE documents, eight main areas can be identified in the following terms, borrowed as much as possible from the documents themselves.

1. Definition of Interfaith and Interreligious Dialogue (IID)

IID is the dialogue, exchange and communication between formal representatives of religious or belief communities or individuals of different religious or belief backgrounds.

2. Commitment to Interfaith and Interreligious Dialogue

The OSCE is committed to:

- a. emphasizing the importance of IID;
- b. considering IID necessary;
- c. encouraging IID;
- d. promoting IID;
- e. facilitating IID;
- f. focusing their activities on IID;
- g. undertaking initiatives to support IID;
- i. contributing to a continued and strengthened IID.

3. Purpose of Interfaith and Interreligious Dialogue

The OSCE understands IID as aimed at:

- a. promoting, facilitating and strengthening tolerance, respect and mutual understanding, among individuals of different religious or belief backgrounds;
- b. fostering understanding and mutual respect between individuals of different religious or belief backgrounds and between religious or belief communities;
- c. fostering a shared responsibility towards advancing everyone's freedom of religion or belief and other human rights;
- d. protecting and promoting freedom of religion or belief for all;



e. contributing to the development and delivery of common initiatives for addressing the practical needs of and challenges facing society;

f. fostering a common understanding/consensus on universally accepted 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.

4. Features of Interfaith and Interreligious Dialogue

The OSCE understands IID as:

- a. possibly leading to cooperation and partnerships;
- b. consisting of and aiming at mutual understanding;
- c. developing at the local, regional and national levels.

5. Format of Interfaith and Interreligious Dialogue

The OSCE understands IID as unfolding through many different forms of communication and exchange across religious or belief boundaries. It is emphasized that informal dialogue activities have a particularly important contribution to make to efforts to enhance mutual understanding and promote tolerance.

6. IID, intercultural dialogue and interethnic understanding

The OSCE understands IID as being possibly combined:

- a. with intercultural dialogue and cultural exchange;
- b. with interethnic understanding.

7. The role of the State

The OSCE understands IID as:

a. undertaken at the free initiative of the religious or belief communities themselves, or

- b. State-sponsored.

If State-sponsored, IID should:

a. reflect the existing and emerging diversity of religious or belief communities, including newly-established and numerically smaller communities and non-believers;

- b. respect the voluntary participation of religious or belief communities;
- c. ensure the substantive and substantial participation of women and youth;



- d. avoid undue governmental interference;
- e. imply great transparency in the political process.

8. Freedom of Religion or Belief and Interfaith and Interreligious Dialogue

While emphasising the importance of IID for freedom of religion or belief, and the correlated responsibility of individuals of different religious or belief backgrounds and religious or belief communities, the OSCE reminds governments involved in IID that freedom of religion or belief should be protected and promoted at all stages, in particular:

- a. when the autonomy of religious or belief communities is at stake;
- b. when religious or belief communities are reluctant to engage in dialogue;
- c. when governments would interfere with matters pertaining to religious doctrine;
- d. when the impartiality and neutrality of the State is at risk.

Evolution

In accordance with its tradition, and due to the non-legally binding political commitment of the participating states, the OSCE is a constantly evolving institution. As anticipated, the formulation of the summary of principles presented above belongs to the reflection within the OSCE-ODIHR panel of experts on FoRB between 2016 and 2019. The formulation has been partially modified in the 2019 Policy Guidance, starting from the adoption of «interfaith and interreligious dialogue and partnerships» as the expression of reference.

As the journey of the OSCE-ODIHR continues, it is possible that new instruments (such as a toolkit), new formulations (such as «religious and belief dialogues») and new priorities (such as the involvement of governments and a more specific focus on FoRB and security, aiming at emphasising that interfaith and interreligious dialogue and partnership can be a crucial policy tool to promote FoRB and combat intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief) will re-direct the language, purpose and scope of what will be produced by ODIHR on the encounter of interreligious dialogue and FoRB. As challenging as this can be for people working in different capacities for the OSCE, such an effort witnesses the vitality of the OSCE laboratory in this area and beyond.