



Viktor Yelensky, MP: Speech

Fostering Religious Freedom – Ukrainian Perspective in a Global Context

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We are witnesses of a great return of religion in different corners of the globe – in Iran and in the US, in Asia and in Eastern Europe, religion has powerfully manifested itself in politics, culture, and in international affairs. This great comeback sometimes and very often is not idyllic but violent and crude. Religion plays role in 60% of all main conflict today. At that connection between religiously motivated conflicts and religious freedom and rule of law is crystally clear: the more religious freedom, the less religious wars, conflicts ad religiously-driven violence.

However, we have to fully realize the dramatic lack of religious freedom in the contemporary world.

We also have to admit that the legal systems of too many countries are not friendly to the oldest among internationally recognized freedoms – freedom of conscience and belief.

According to the Pew Research Center, 75% of the world’s population lives in countries where governments, social groups or individuals restrict people’s ability to freely practice their faith.

Only in 20% of world’s countries are all religious groups generally treated the same.

In 55% of all world’s countries, governments use force toward religious groups that result in individuals being killed, physically abused, imprisoned, detained or displaced from their homes, or having their personal or religious properties damaged or destroyed.

26% of all governments display hostility, involving physical violence, towards minority or non-approved religious groups.

Only in 37% of countries is there no harassment or intimidation of religious groups by any level of government.

At the same time, our Panel proves that for the world’s parliaments, religious freedom is no longer “the missing dimension”.

II.

Ukraine has rather decent standards in the sphere of religious freedom. The main reason for this is religious pluralism, the lack of strict denominational identity which does not allow the establishment of a religious monopoly, and historically a rather high level of societal tolerance towards other believers. The law that regulates Church–state relations in Ukraine was adopted eight months before the disintegration of the Soviet Union and has undergone no fundamental changes since then. This law stipulates the separation of the Church from the state and of the schools from the Church. It also contains a number of important provisions that provoked vigorous debate in the years that followed: the equality of religious organizations before the law; the right of a religious organization to exist by virtue of the mere fact of its creation; the absence of a trial period before a religious organization acquires the status of a legal entity; and equal status for the Churches of the majority and small religious organizations, including confessions that are new and nontraditional for Ukraine.

After the 2014 Eurorevolution, the Ukrainian Parliament and the Ukrainian government adopted important laws, legal amendments and decrees for substantial improvements in the sphere of religious freedom. Parliament adopted the Law on Prison Chaplaincy; the Government issued a Decree on Military Chaplaincy; theology was recognized as an educational discipline; amendments to the Law On Education allows Churches and religious organization to establish public schools and Universities; and special tariffs and tax exemptions for religious organizations (natural gas and electricity) were provided. What is important to underline is that Ukraine keeps high standards in the sphere of freedom of conscience and beliefs despite the fact that the country resists military aggression and is in war. Specifically, it should be stressed that the Ukrainian State confirmed the right to conscientious objection to military service based on one's religion or belief, and allowed for alternative service of a non-combatant or civilian character.

III.

At the same time, Russian Federation aggression against Ukraine is accompanied by brutal and ongoing suppression of religious freedom in illegally-annexed Crimea and in occupied territories in the East of Ukraine. Catholics and Muslims, Protestants and Ukrainian Orthodox in these areas experience persistent abduction, forced disappearance, violence, torture and killings. Four members of the Transfiguration Church became new martyrs for the faith in the Eastern Ukrainian city of Sloviansk. They were captured during the Trinity Sunday service by pro-Russian guerillas on June 8, 2014. The men of Church were brutally beaten and killed. Their bodies were found in a mass grave after the guerillas had left the city and the Ukrainian army took over. Martyrdom of priests and pastors in occupied Donbas increases. We should add to these dramatic facts an enormous list of houses of worship, different sacred buildings which guerillas turned into barracks, weapons warehouses, and training areas where militants are training to kill.

In order to justify aggression against Ukraine, the Russian government actively uses information warfare. This year, the Kremlin will spend \$1.6 billion for disinformation. Notorious TV channel Russia Today costs Russian taxpayers \$275 million each year. Religion plays a special role in this disinformation war. In fact, the Moscow Patriarchate and Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church took an expectedly hostile position against Ukraine. Patriarchic speakers have lashed out against the pro-European Union movement in Ukraine and called for interference to keep the country within "Eastern Christian civilization". Patriarch Kirill himself headed the religious battlefront of hybrid war against Ukraine and tried to sanctify Russian invasion. In August 2014, he issued a letter to the Primate of the Orthodox Churches where he accused "Uniates and Schismatic" in waging religious war against "canonical Orthodoxy".

The Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine has not only violated norms of international law, treaties on peace and friendship signed by Kiev and Moscow and the guarantees of territorial integrity

which great powers provided Ukraine in exchange for renunciation of its nuclear arsenal. Russian aggression has been a huge blow to the values professed by all great religions of the world.

IV.

In many legal and public policy circles today, religious freedom is being presented as the key to emancipating individuals and communities from violence, hostility, and oppression. Indeed, religious freedom is often said to lead comprehensively to democracy, greater civil and political liberty, and prosperity. This understanding has driven the creation of such an important institutions as the Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union, the European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance, the International Religious Freedom Ambassador-at-Large within the US State Department, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, the Special Adviser on International Religious Freedom within the US National Security Council, not to say about legal instruments, guidelines, recommendations.

However, in my understanding, parliaments of the world might do much more to protect, strengthen and promote religious freedom:

(i) First of all, on the base of our conference and already founded network, an Inter-parliamentarian Association for Freedom of Religion and Belief may be established;

(ii) Summarizing the best practices and theoretic research Recommendation for National legislations on freedom of religion should be elaborated. These Recommendations should not only confirm and reconsider fundamental principles of religious freedom for further implementation in national legislation, but also provide legislators with clear patterns of resolving hot topics (e.g., how to reconcile individual and group rights for religious freedom or right for religious freedom with national security issues, etc.);

(iii) An International Day for Religious Freedom should be established, when parliaments all over the world with particular strength speak out against religious persecution, and stand unequivocally for religious freedom.

V.

Terrorists and extremists do not respect resolutions of international forums, conferences, statements, and petitions. They do not respect a prayer of a monk, a picture of a girl in which she is dreaming of peace for her country. They do respect cruelty, barbed wire, and guns. But just in my generation, the Berlin Wall, with a length of 155 km, was shattered to pieces. The great empire that was raving the whole world fell. Dozens of regimes that have boasted of their power and despised prayers of monks, resolutions of conferences, and kid's drawings have gone. That is why I do believe in the success of our forum. I do believe in human conscience. I do believe in powerful a Gospel reminder: For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty.