

INTERNATIONAL SEMINARY

Religious Liberty in Danger in Russia: A Cause for Concern in Europe

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Religious Liberty in Russia: A Roundtable

Introduction by Raffaella Di Marzio

On June 24, 2013 the Council of the European Union adopted the *EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief*. The Guidelines were the result of a long process, in which the European churches were actively involved.

The first article of the Guidelines states that *the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is a fundamental right of every human being*, and article 3 adds that *violations or abuses of freedom of religion or belief [...] affect people in all parts of the world, including Europe*. According to article 5, *the EU and its Member States are committed to respecting, protecting and promoting freedom of religion or belief, as a right [article 6] to be exercised by everyone everywhere, based on the principles of equality, non-discrimination and universality*. In the same article 6, EU affirms its commitment to *prevent and address violations of this right in a timely, consistent and coherent manner*.

This commitment is not limited to violations occurring within the borders of the European Union. In fact, the Guidelines *give clear political lines to officials of EU institutions and EU Member States, to be used in contacts with third countries* (article 8). With the same article 8 of the Guidelines, EU and its Member States, including Italy, promised to *react effectively to violations wherever they occur* in the world.

As mentioned earlier, European Christian churches contributed to the preparation of the Guidelines. After they were approved, The Church and Society Commission of the Council of European Churches (CEC), representing the Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican and Old Catholic Churches, welcomed the guidelines but said that it would monitor their implementation and evaluation. The guidelines were also welcomed by the Commission of [Roman Catholic] Bishops' Conferences of the EU (COMECE), although with reservations as to their practical effectiveness.

This seminar confirmed that some reservations were in order. We heard some brave voices within the Italian Parliament, as well as in the governments and parliaments of other EU Member States, denouncing what is happening in Russia. But we are far away from the prompt and effective reaction mandated by the Guidelines. In fact, some Member States, including France, promote and finance anti-cult organizations such as FECRIS, which, as we heard today, support the persecution of religious minorities in Russia—obviously by claiming they are not really religious, but this is the usual word game used by all enemies of religious liberty.

And a church member of the CEC, the Russian Orthodox Church, has applauded the liquidation of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, and hosts and finances institutions that are actively promoting the liquidation of other minority religious.

It is now time to hear the voices of those religions that experience discrimination and persecution in Russia. This is the purpose of this roundtable.