



UNIVERSAL RIGHTS GROUP

Short summary report on EU-URG Panel Discussion

Combatting religious intolerance: How to make the best use of existing frameworks?

Tuesday 9th February 2016, Geneva

On 9th February, the EU Delegation to the UN Office and other international organisations in Geneva, together with the Universal Rights Group (URG), hosted a half-day informal panel discussion on 'Combatting religious intolerance: How to make the best use of existing frameworks?' The event presented an opportunity to exchange views, reflections, and information on recent developments, ahead of the 31st session of the UN Human Rights Council in March, where the fight against religious intolerance and discrimination will once again be a key political priority for the international community.

The 'round-table' style event, held under the Chatham House rule, included panel presentations and reflections from ambassadors, State representatives, NGO representatives, OHCHR officials and leading academic experts in the field. The participants took stock of progress with: the implementation of the action plan contained in Council resolution 16/18 on combatting religious intolerance; the Istanbul Process; the Rabat Plan of Action; and the implementation of Council resolutions on freedom of religion or belief. Participants also reflected on ways to maximize synergies with UN and other relevant processes.

Participants noted that 2016 has begun as 2015 ended, with a long string of troubling incidences, throughout the world, of intolerance, hatred, violence, and discrimination performed in the name of religion or belief. Against this backdrop of increased religious intolerance, there was broad agreement on the timely nature of the meeting, and on the importance of 'reenergising' resolution 16/18.

As one ambassador noted: “Everyday we are reminded that the issue of combatting religious intolerance is of the utmost importance. There are individuals out there who advocate for intolerance, so the rest of us must reaffirm the importance of the opposite.”

An academic stressed the particular importance of the Istanbul Process, which, she said, is “more important now than ever, given that we are witnessing very disturbing phenomena of conflict, collective hatred, and even crimes against humanity in the name of religion.” Some participants emphasised the need to ensure that other human rights, like freedom of speech and expression, are not violated in the pursuit of combatting religious intolerance. Others argued that in order to combat religious intolerance, the international community should first “draw a distinction between free speech and the freedom of expression that vilify and incite religious hatred.”

Participants once again emphasised the importance of maintaining consensus on future iterations of resolution 16/18, as well as of resolutions on freedom of religion of belief. Notwithstanding, a URG representative noted that “consensus should not be seen as the end, it is only the means to an end, the end being the implementation of the 16/18 action plan on the ground, and effectively combatting intolerance.”

Another delegate agreed, arguing that the UN is so focused on ensuring “continued consensus on theoretical matters,” that it pays only lip service to achieving actual results on the ground. An ambassador argued that it was a significant failure of the international community that States are more focused on UN-level debates, than local level change. Another asked: “how do we get the issue out of the UN debating chamber into practical developments?”

Most speakers agreed on the central importance of the Istanbul Process as a tool to promote implementation of 16/18. There were suggestions that future Istanbul Process meetings could take place in SE Asia, or in Europe. A number of representatives from NGOs and States suggested that the Istanbul Process should learn lessons from the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) – so ‘UPRize the Istanbul Process.’

One NGO representative advocated for moving the Istanbul Process away from theoretical debates and in a more pragmatic or practical direction (so national and local experts rather than UN diplomats).

Another topic of discussion was that of reporting on implementation. Some State representatives called for greater self-reflection, and for States to focus on implementation in their own country rather than on commenting on implementation elsewhere.

The need to “widen the conversation” on 16/18 by including States from outside the traditional WEOG-OIC discussion more in meetings of the Istanbul Process, and by improved civil society participation, was raised by a number of participants. “All countries face challenges in this area, and many have interesting ways to confront the problem. It would be good for all these States to participate to exchange good practice, especially at a local, expert level.”

An ambassador noted: “The objective is to bring together relevant national actors to exchange good practices and discuss how we can learn from each other and from each other’s achievements at the national level.” Another representative continued: “There is lots of good practice out there. We just need to connect the dots and expose those experiences to the rest of the world.”

Several panellists and State representatives also emphasized the crucial role civil society plays in driving religious tolerance and ethnic inclusion. An academic, while noting efforts to include civil society in the Jeddah meeting of the Istanbul Process, called for the Process to be more inclusive and universal: “All stakeholders should be included and civil society actors should be present and heard at the table.”