



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

Secretary General Lamberto Zannier

Closing Remarks

5th Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions
Astana, 10 June 2015

Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Distinguished participants,

It has been a privilege and great pleasure for me to participate in this *5th Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions*. I would like to thank the Republic of Kazakhstan, and personally President Nazarbayev, for hosting this high-level gathering, which has become one of the most prominent inter-faith dialogue initiatives world-wide. Kazakhstan's commitment to intercultural, inter-religious and inter-faith dialogue is well known and increasingly recognised in the OSCE and other international fora.

I have greatly appreciated the constructive discussions. Allow me now to say a few words from our regional perspective.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe provides an inclusive platform for dialogue that has traditionally been used to correct misperceptions, decrease tensions, and promote stability and a culture of tolerance across the OSCE area. Inter-faith dialogue has been on the OSCE agenda for many years and is an integral part of the Organization's efforts to promote tolerance and non-discrimination.

These efforts involve various institutions that make up the OSCE family, primarily the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in Warsaw, the Secretariat in Vienna, and our network of field operations, which account for much of the OSCE's practical and operational impact. By way of example, let me highlight the OSCE's support for setting up an inter-religious council in Kosovo, which is expected to be formally established later this

year. In recognition of the rich cultural, social and religious diversity in our region, we have established three Personal Representatives of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office who focus on combating intolerance against Jews, Muslims and Christians, as well as against members of other religions. And significantly, one of them, in recent times, has been a high-level distinguished personality from Kazakhstan.

At the forthcoming Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting in Vienna, on 2-3 July, the ODIHR will specifically focus on the conditions for a meaningful and sustained inter-religious dialogue in advancing freedom of religion or belief, mutual respect and understanding.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Many speakers at this Congress have referred to the current, turbulent international context to emphasize that promoting tolerance across religions and cultures is now more important than ever. I fully agree. Not only do we continue to witness discrimination, racism, xenophobia and intolerance, we are also seeing an unprecedented growth in radicalization that leads to violent extremism and terrorism. This has become a truly global phenomenon that affects all our societies.

Less than a month ago, we organised an *OSCE Security Days* event in Vienna that focused on promoting dialogue to prevent radicalization and violent extremism, a key theme also at this Congress. In this connection, let me highlight the responsibility and positive role that religious leaders, together with government and civil society leaders, can play in preventing radicalization and violent extremism.

Religion is not a root cause of violent extremism. Many here have already underscored this, but I believe it is a significant point worth underlining. Religions condemn violence and promote peace. It is therefore incorrect and misleading to blame any particular religion for acts of violence carried out in its name. Those who perpetrate terrorist acts often manipulate religion to pursue agendas that have nothing to do with religious teachings.

This is why engaging in open, inclusive and transparent dialogue is one important way to help separate violent extremism from religion and prevent the identification of terrorism with any single religious or cultural group. Our own partners, especially our Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation, have actively engaged in this debate. I look forward to continuing this dialogue at our Mediterranean Conference that will take place in Jordan in October.

At the *OSCE Security Days* event last month, as well as here at this Congress, there was wide agreement that religious leaders have a key role to play in dialogue processes, and that inclusive dialogue has the potential to increase mutual understanding and respect. Allow me to highlight three observations from the discussions in Vienna and here in Astana:

First, religious leaders can play a positive role in taking up the concerns of those most vulnerable in our societies, especially young people, who may be tempted by extremist ideologies. Addressing their material and also spiritual needs more effectively can help strengthen their identity and sense of belonging, which could help to prevent their marginalization and possible radicalization. Religious institutions, in particular when they act as part of a larger network of civil society organizations, are potential safety nets for individuals who could be susceptible to radicalization.

Second, religious extremism and fanaticism are often the products of a distorted or uninformed interpretation of religious texts and teachings. By improving the quality of education in general but also, more specifically, of religious education and in making sure that religious education endorses positive rather than divisive messages, religious leaders and institutions, together with state and civil society organizations, can make a significant contribution toward preventing radicalization.

Finally, extremists often make very skilled use of the media. In particular, the Internet and new social media have become powerful tools in the hands of terrorists and other violent groups. However, media can also be effective tools for promoting counter-narratives and messages of tolerance, and for connecting all those who are working to advance mutual understanding and dialogue. This is why joining forces behind the common goal of protecting society from violent extremism necessarily needs to involve the media.

A forum like this distinguished assembly, in which so many religions and faiths are represented, provides an excellent occasion to rally around our shared goal of peace, development and security for all. In our efforts to counter radicalization and violent extremism we should stand united. By speaking out and reinforcing each other, we can empower those in society who can help us get the message across.

For exactly these reasons, we in the OSCE are launching an Organization-wide communication campaign to promote effective counter-narratives to radicalization. Under the slogan of “OSCE United in Countering Violent Extremism” we aim to send a powerful message that unites the voices of our region against the forces of intolerance and extremism. We aim at encouraging other highly influential actors, including religious leaders and institutions, to mobilize others and undertake initiatives against intolerance and violent extremism.

In concluding, let me reiterate my gratitude to our generous hosts and pay tribute to the personal leadership of President Nazarbayev for having brought us here to meet and engage with each other and to give further impetus to strengthening dialogue and tolerance for the sake of a safer and more secure future for us all.

Thank you.