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Freedom of religion in Europe

Written question No. 578 to the Committee of Ministers

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On the 3rd of November 2009, the European Court of Human Rights adjudged that the crosses hung in school classrooms can violate freedom of conscience and should be removed unless all persons involved agree otherwise. According to the Court, hanging crosses in classrooms violates the "right of parents to bring up their children in consistence with the parents' beliefs" and "the religious freedom of students". Although the judgment applies only to Italy and is not automatically extended to other member states of the Council of Europe, it can be expected that the Court will give similar judgments if summons from other countries are considered.

The judgment of the Court ordering the removal of crosses from Italian schools is incomprehensible and has aroused serious fears about religious freedom in Europe. Religious freedom supposes tolerance of other religions and implies general public acceptance of cultural and religious diversity in a public space in which each citizen can manifest his/ her religious beliefs. Attempts at restricting religion to the private sphere should be treated as attempts at restricting religious inspiration in social life.

It should be emphasised that the Court has encroached on a matter deeply related to the historical, cultural and spiritual identity of one European nation. It is threatening to witness an intention of marginalisation in the education sphere of a symbol of fundamental significance for religious values in history and a national culture. The argument of the Court that this symbol cannot be treated as a suprareligious symbol of European culture because it is a sign belonging to a specific Church cannot be accepted.

Therefore Mr Lipiński,

To ask the Committee of Ministers,

To which degree the protection of minorities in the spheres of religion and culture can be related to the violation and rejection of the values accepted by the majority of society? Does the Committee of Ministers intend to launch a serious debate in European countries aimed at defining a proper understanding and range of religious freedom and solving the question of the presence of religious symbols in public space? According to the Committee of Ministers, is it correct to introduce the same rules regarding the above problems in all member states of the Council of Europe, knowing that their historical and cultural experiences are very diverse?

