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Violence against religious communities

Committee Opinion[1]
Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons
Rapporteur: Mr Tuğrul TÜRKEŞ, Turkey, European Democrat Group

A. Conclusions of the committee

1. The Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons supports the report prepared by the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy and congratulates its rapporteur, Mr Luca Volontè, on having brought to the Parliamentary Assembly's attention the issue of violence against religious communities.

2. The committee considers that there is a need to make reference in the draft resolution to refugees and asylum seekers as well as to the fact that migrants, often Muslims, are also the victims of violent acts within Europe. Therefore, the committee proposes the following amendments.

B. Proposed amendments to the draft resolution

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 5, insert the following paragraph:

> *"The Assembly condemns any instances of negative stereotyping of persons based on religion as well as the advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence."*

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 8.10, add the following sub-paragraph:

> *"recognise the need to provide international protection for those seeking asylum due to religious persecution."*

Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, after paragraph 8.10, add the following sub-paragraph:

> *"duly take into account the possible overlap between racism, xenophobia and religious hatred, keeping in mind that these phenomena are often directed against migrant communities."*

1. Reference to committee: Doc. 12542, Reference 3761 of 15 April 2011. Reporting committee: Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy. See Doc. 13157. Opinion approved by the committee on 22 April 2013.

C. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Türkeş, rapporteur for opinion

1. The report presented by our colleague, Luca Volontè, on behalf of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy is topical. Violence against religious communities continues to find its roots, both in and outside of Europe.

2. I would like to complement this report by drawing the Assembly's attention to three relevant issues which are not fully covered in Mr Volontè's report: the relevance of religious persecution as a ground for asylum, the fact that religious violence within Europe is often targeted at migrant communities and that violence can be verbal.

1. Religious persecution as a ground for asylum

3. As stipulated in Article 1.A(2) of the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees the term refugee applies also to any person "… owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of … religion …, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it".

4. In its Recommendation 1957 (2011) on violence against Christians in the Middle East, the Assembly called on member States to refrain from encouraging the members of Christian communities in the Middle East to seek refuge in Europe, except in cases where the survival of such communities becomes impossible. It is true that seeking refuge is a matter of last recourse. Nevertheless, I think it is appropriate to stress in a report specifically dealing with the issue of violence against religious communities that religious persecution is a ground for asylum and that member States should provide international protection to asylum seekers in such cases.

5. This is why I propose, in Amendment A, to add a reference to refugees and asylum seekers in the draft resolution and the need to provide international protection.

2. Religious violence is often targeted at migrants' communities

6. While the report of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy covers in some detail the situation of Christians in the Middle East, it could also have focused more on the situation of Muslim communities in Council of Europe member States in view of the number of cases of violence against members of this community.

7. Indeed this was dealt with recently by the Assembly in a report on European Muslim communities confronted with extremism and in a report on Islam, Islamism and Islamophobia and it would have deserved to have been dealt with on an equal footing with the fate of Christians in a report on violence against religious minorities. I also think it is important that the Assembly first and foremost focuses on the situation in the Council of Europe member States.

8. Last January, the Assembly debated under the urgent procedure a report on "Migration and asylum: mounting tensions in the eastern Mediterranean". This report underlined that migrants, asylum seekers and refugees have become scapegoats and the target of violent attacks. I am aware that these attacks are not necessarily linked with religion issues but I fear it might often be the case. The frontier between xenophobia and what is now called Islamophobia is not always clear. As is rightly stated in Assembly Resolution 1743 (2010) on Islam, Islamism and Islamophobia, "[s]tereotypes, misunderstandings and fears with regard to Islam are typical symptoms of a widespread lack of adequate knowledge among non-Muslims in Europe". In this respect, fear can lead to violence.

9. The majority of Muslims in western European countries are migrants or have a migratory background and this is where violence against religious communities can overlap with violence against migrant communities.

10. Furthermore, one should add that violence is not always, and not only, physical. Words can also be violent. In this respect, there is a worrying trend in Europe, of political leaders, mostly from far right-wing parties, being verbally violent towards Muslim communities. In this they are often targeting migrant communities.

11. This is why I have proposed Amendment B, in order to highlight the overlap between religious violence and violence against migrant communities. Amendment C refers to the fact that violence can also be verbal.