

Religious Freedom in Eastern Europe 25 Years after Communism

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Bratislava, Slovakia - In December 1989 the so-called Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia reached a new climax with the opening of the borders to the “capitalist” neighboring states. Czechs and Slovaks were open to welcome new ideas and religions too. Unfortunately, the opening and renewal lasted only few years. With the advent of new religions, the campaigners of the notorious anti-cult movement poured into East Europe and Russia. Smear campaigns triggered a wave of persecution which lasts until today. “In the last years the situation has, in fact, worsened,” says Peter Zoehrer from the Vienna-based Forum for Religious Freedom Europe (FOREF).



To commemorate the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain, UPF-Slovakia decided to highlight the turn of events. UPF secretary general Milos Klas and his wife Barbara organized a forum on “Religious Freedom in Eastern Europe after 1989: Has the Target of Persecution Changed?” An intensive advertising by mail was complemented by six days of leaflet distribution at the Comenius University.

The forum took place on Dec. 3, 2014, in an office building in downtown Bratislava. Despite rainy and cold weather, around 40 people accepted the invitation to discuss religious freedom issues. Lectures were given by the co-founder of the human rights organization FOREF and by a renowned Slovak historian as well as the bishop of the Old Catholic Church. The historian Dr. Lubomir Morbacher started by describing the tactics of the Communist party to destroy the powerful Catholic Church and later on smaller communities. He spoke in detail about three cases, two Catholic priests of the “secret church” and the Unification Church member Marie Zivna, who were murdered.



Peter Zoehrer inspired the audience with a varied presentation, ranging from the explanation of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights up to the influence of France on anti-cult policies in the East European countries and the former Soviet republics. A big headache are the activities of FECRIS [European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects], which is sponsored largely by the French government. On top of that, the Russian extremist Alexander Dvorkin is now vice-president of FECRIS. Even once liberal states like Hungary have recently changed their laws; in 2011 Prime Minister Viktor Orban caused an uproar with the massive deregistration of religious communities which resulted in a downgrading of their status. This affected about 200 religious communities, including Methodists, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, Reform Jews, Buddhists and Hindus.

Guests were thrilled by the discourse of Archbishop Augustin Bacinsky of the Old Catholic Church about the “unseen borders and fences which divide humankind until today”. He delivered a rhetoric masterpiece starting with the tragic division in the first human family leading up to the confrontation between democracy and communism. He expressed regret for the lost opportunities after 1989.

Among the audience were the heads of the Old Catholic Church, the New Apostolic Church, Hare Krishna, Falun Gong, and other religious activists. UPF-Slovakia president Pavol Chrancok rose up and thanked Peter Zoehrer for his assistance during his court case caused by religious discrimination. A surprise was the presence of the first secretary of the Russian Embassy, who was not too pleased with the presentation of FOREF. New guests received as a gift the book “As a Peace-Loving Global Citizen.”

Nine guests made the long journey from the town of Nitra, which was the first Christian center in Slovakia, established after 800 AD.

FOREF specializes on the monitoring of official and public intolerance against religious minorities and advancing public awareness for their rights. Founded in December 2005, the NGO has gained much attention and respects from the religious communities as well as among experts thanks to the untiring efforts of Peter Zoehrer and a few supporters. In April, the internationally known human rights expert Dr. Aaron Rhodes became the president. FOREF alarmed the international public, when a Unification Church missionary was jailed in Kazakhstan a few years ago. It also took a very active stance to help the victims of kidnappings in Japan.

More information about FOREF www.foref-europe.org