

UPF Vienna, Austria: Interreligious NGOs Cooperation Can Reduce Crime

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Vienna, Austria – What happens in a society before a young person becomes radicalized? What causes hatred to turn into violence or disagreements to become crimes? From Bosnia and Herzegovina to Kosovo, Rwanda and Pakistan, participants at an event at the United Nations in Vienna reached a common conclusion: Crime prevention begins where people feel part of society, and not its victims.

This question was the focus of a side event during the meeting of the United Nations Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ) at the Vienna International Centre on June 2, 2026. The event, titled "The Relevance of Interreligious Cooperation for Crime Prevention," was organized by the UPF-Austria in cooperation with the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations (CFBO), the International Association of Youth and Students for Peace (IAYSP), and the United Nations Correspondents Association Vienna.



Mr. Peter Haider, president of UPF-Austria, said in opening the program that discussions about security should not be limited to state institutions and legal measures. Communities, religious groups and civil society can play a role in building trust and preventing conditions that foster violence and crime. He recalled the words of Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela about the importance of dialogue, mutual understanding and human encounters. Fear and hatred, he said, often arise where communication is lacking and prejudice replaces personal experience.

One of the most insightful contributions was from **Mr. Jean-Luc Lemahieu**, former director of policy analysis and public relations at the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). He said that young people and adolescents are a key target group for any sustainable crime prevention strategy. Mr. Lemahieu pointed out that, worldwide, a young person is killed by violence every seven minutes. And around 166 million young people between the ages of 10 and 19 live with diagnosable mental health problems or disorders.

His central message was that many risky behaviors stem not from criminal intent, but from the need for belonging, recognition and identity. Stable role models and positive social spaces – including educational, cultural, sports and religious communities – are important, as they provide young people with orientation and a sense of belonging.



The ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), **Ms. Danka Savić**, shared the experiences of her compatriots following a war that left deep societal wounds. She said that extremism and violence rarely arise suddenly. Rather, they develop gradually when communities stop communicating with each other and people begin to retreat behind closed identities.



Dr. Androniki Barla, an Eastern Orthodox theologian and canon lawyer from Greece, emphasized that sustainable security cannot be guaranteed solely through prosecution and sanctions. She linked interreligious cooperation to UN Sustainable Development Goal 16, which aims to promote peaceful, just and inclusive societies. Dr. Barla pointed out that the major religious traditions share fundamental values, including respect for human dignity, non-violence, and responsibility toward others. Strengthening these values can significantly contribute to fostering a culture of the rule of law and social cohesion.

The presentation by **Professor Ejona Icka**, clinical psychologist and director of the International Association of Youth and Students for Peace for the Balkan region, was particularly impressive. She described experiences from an international youth summit in Mitrovica, Kosovo, recounting how difficult it had been to build trust between young participants from different ethnic groups over several months. Yet a seemingly simple question from her Orthodox husband about a church in her home parish brought down barriers within minutes. For Ms. Icka, this was impressive proof that religion can build bridges when used as an instrument of encounter and not of division. She also emphasized that crime prevention begins in the family. Children learn not primarily through words, but through the behavior of adults, which they observe daily, she said.



The event concluded with a presentation by **Dr. Afsar Rathor**, former UN official and representative of the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations. Drawing on decades of experience in conflict regions such as Rwanda, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Somalia and Kosovo, he emphasized that hatred does not begin with weapons, but with the loss of trust between people. Dr. Rathor presented the work of CFBO in Pakistan, where Muslims, Christians, Hindus and Sikhs work together on projects to promote social cohesion. Respect for religious diversity is not only an ethical principle, he said, but also an effective instrument for preventing extremism, violence and crime.



Despite the different geographical, cultural and religious perspectives of the speakers, a common message ran through the entire event: Safe societies are not created solely through punishments and security measures. Security begins where people experience belonging, where differences are understood not as threats but as opportunities for cooperation, and where trust becomes part of everyday social life. Crime is prevented primarily through building just, inclusive and resilient communities in which people experience respect and recognition, providing no breeding ground for hatred, extremism and violence.

A video of the conference may be found [here](#).