

## **Raising Awareness for Minority Rights – How to pave a way from a regulatory framework to broad public support (with focus on the situation of Muslims in Austria/Europe)**

*“States shall protect the existence of the National or Ethnic, Cultural, Religious and Linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories and encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity.” (Art. 1)*

The visibility of Muslims has become a big issue in Europe: the construction of Mosque minarets, the wearing of hijab are often put in a context as if these meant a threat against European identity. There has even been brought up a term to catch this feeling – „Islamization“– as if the visibility of Muslims meant an open sign of a „hidden agenda“ to overrule Europe. Reawakening old concepts of “the enemy”, populists stir up emotions against „the other“, aiming at strengthening a feeling of „That’s us! “ Backing up the own identity by restriction and discrimination of „the other“. Creating fear that „Muslims will overrule Europe. “ The case of Anders Breivik has opened many eyes how dangerous this kind of thinking may turn.

In all these public debates, especially in the media, I have never come across a quotation of the „UN Declaration of the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities“. Isn’t this very telling, somehow significant? Why isn’t the text used in raising awareness? The beautiful visions expressed in the declaration – how strong do opinion leaders and politicians stand up for it?

The challenges Muslims in Europe are facing enable us to draw some conclusions why the implementation of the declaration into the hearts of people is still difficult.

- **Europe has no tradition in religious pluralism:** „Cuius regio eius religio“. During centuries people of different faith, especially Protestants and Catholics used to live separately. When tolerance laws alleviated the situation, the visibility of the “dominating” church still remained over prominent. As in Austria, where Protestants were not allowed to build church towers or ring the bells for Sunday praying until the second half of the 19th century – a striking similarity to nowadays discussions concerning mosques in Europe.
- **Nationalism is based on the construction of the one and unique national identity – with no room for multiple identities – a concept that is not resolved yet:** The very protection of „identity“ of minorities as developed in the declaration would have been regarded as a threat against the national identity – and might have caused unwillingness to act.
- **Minority rights are often linked with carrying the citizenship – and don’t agree with the perception of „foreigners“:** Muslims in Europe are still seen as „guest-workers“, not belonging to the country, even if they carry the citizenship. That their religion has turned to be a part of the country is ignored. Again: Most likely this has to do with the general impression that being a Muslim doesn’t seem to fit into the frame of national identity. By the way: That many Muslims form autochthon groups especially in Eastern Europe – is often ignored and again intensifies the image of “Islam as a non European religion”.
- **Anti-religious attitudes gain more and more influence in European discourses:** The phenomenon of a growing number of people who don’t care about religion or even feel above such “anti-modern superstition” makes it difficult to raise awareness for freedom of religion. In the worst case this may have a negative impact on understanding Human Rights – classifying it as “less significant”. Current debates like on male circumcision as practiced in Judaism and Islam mirror this tendency. Former discussions where freedom of expression and freedom of religion seemed to be played off against each other go into the same direction.

- **Anti-discrimination law lacks moral authority in broader public:** The prejudice that anti-discrimination law means giving a bonus to minorities and cutting on the majority has to be countered. Especially in times of social instability, as today intensified by the global economic crisis, anti-discrimination laws are not very popular. Those who would like to refer on them often hesitate – They know that undertaking legal measures may include getting under moral pressure. As in the case of women wearing headscarf being denied a job. Claiming their right may bring them in a situation where public opinion is still against them.

All these points shouldn't be seen as a reason to become desperate – but quite in the contrary show the declarations visionary potential! Now it is high time to go ahead! Parallel to each of the mentioned five points there can be found an inspiration for future action.

- **It has been visionary to include „religion“ in the declaration – anti-discrimination law should follow this line:** The EU Anti Discrimination Guidelines differentiate between the working place and other areas. The Racial Equality Directive 2000/43/EC names „racial or ethnic origin“, but there is no protection when it comes to religion. So many cases can only be dealt with if labelled under „ethnic“ discrimination – which backs up the cliché that Muslims are „foreigners“.
- **In times of globalisation 19th century concepts of nationalism are completely out of place – people's plural identities will open new horizons:** The EU strives to create a new kind of European identity that naturally needs to open up for plural identities. Minority groups can be very inspiring in this process as they often have cultivated plural identities. Being Muslim and European, speaking Arabic or Turkish and a national language both fluently – not at all considers a contradiction!
- **The status of religious minority groups should be reflected in national law:** Austria might be some kind of a role-model. In this year 2012 we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the legal recognition of Islam. Already in 1912 Islam was officially acknowledged – which has to do with Bosnia-Herzegovina belonging to the Habsburgian Empire at that time. Muslims were given the right to practice their religion in public and inner autonomy was guaranteed when it comes to religious interpretation – by the way an excellent way to establish a positive feeling of belonging to a country and loyalty towards the rule of state.
- **Freedom of religion is a cornerstone in the Human Rights concept – and has to be respected as such:** The right to believe – or not to believe – cannot be separated from the freedom of expression.
- **Anti-discrimination law should be regarded as a Human Rights issue – where everybody is concerned – a powerful instrument to foster social cohesion:** Anti-discrimination measurements are not to be mistaken as allowing minorities to live exclusively „on their own“– like a rare protected item put into a museum. It's about opening equal access and equal chances – which is beneficial to everybody in society as it strengthens the common potential. Participation of minorities is needed to create social cohesion. Social justice and a jointly felt commitment to solidarity is a matter everybody in society should engage with. Participation of minorities should be regarded as a key to inclusion, as taking up responsibility for the common well being. Minorities themselves should recognize their visible participation in society as a way to create new narratives – overcoming old and negative stereotypes. – And an effective way to prove that an anti-discriminatory approach pays society back more than it gives. This mutual process of getting together has to happen if society wants to proceed.

So what is needed is more enthusiasm in integrating minority issues in „daily politics“. As long as opinion leaders are too hesitant to raise these topics – occasionally they do, secured in isolated occasions with an audience where they can „preach to the converted“ – minority issues will stay....For a minority.

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