

Moldova: UN human rights expert calls for more fostering of religious diversity



Special Rapporteur on the freedom of religion or belief Heiner Bielefeldt

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Moldova's Government leaders should demonstrate robust leadership to encourage religious diversity and ensure that the country's minority groups are not marginalized, a United Nations human rights expert warned today.

The Eastern European nation has made "noteworthy progress" on religious freedom since the era of the Soviet Union, but it can still take further steps to foster diversity, according to Heiner Bielefeldt, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

In a [press statement](#) issued in Chisinau, the capital, after an eight-day visit, Mr. Bielefeldt noted “the obstacles deriving mainly from the overly predominant position of the Orthodox Church, which enjoys a privileged status at variance with the constitutional guarantee of a secular State.

“Moreover, important sectors of society see Orthodox Christianity, in particular the Orthodox Church of Moldova, as constituting the backbone of national identity,” he added.

“Some groups go as far as to explicitly demand, often in an aggressive fashion, to put followers of other denominations – such as Protestants, Jews and especially Muslims – in a marginalized position.

“Although these extremist groups seem to account only for a small minority, they apparently are not met with much criticism from within the Church, thus leading to the perception that they somehow speak on behalf of the country’s Orthodox believers in general, as well as with the tacit approval of the Church authorities.”

Mr. Bielefeldt stressed that what is most needed “is a public culture of appreciating diversity.”

He called on the Government to take the lead by issuing strong anti-discrimination laws, promoting inter-religious communication, investing in civic education and speaking out against incitement to religious hatred.”

The Special Rapporteur stated that religious instruction in Moldova is voluntary according to the law and the Government.

“Strong and effective mechanisms must be developed to protect children who opt out of religious education from any form of negative pressure, be it from school authorities, church officials, other children, or any other party.”

Mr. Bielefeldt, who serves in an independent capacity, reports to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. He will issue a formal report to the Council early next year on his visit to Moldova.

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