

On May 8, 2017, a Regional Conference on Contemporary Issues of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Armenia, Georgia and beyond kicked off in Yerevan at Armenia Mariott hotel. The conference was organized by Eurasia Partnership Foundation, supported by the Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands to Armenia and Georgia. Guests included state officials, religious leaders, representatives of civil society and academia from Armenia and Georgia, the representatives of diplomatic missions accredited in Armenia, and from the Georgian Public Defender's Office.

The occasion was honored with the presences of the Primate of the Armenian Diocese in Georgia, His Grace Bishop Vazgen Mirzakhanyan.

The speakers touched upon the current issues of freedom of religion and belief in Armenia and Georgia, teaching religion in public schools, equality between men and women.

Human rights activists and representatives from NGOs from Georgia accused the Georgian Orthodox Church of intolerance against religious minorities; accusations were made against the government as well. In accordance with the Concordat agreed in 2002 and relevant provisions of the Constitution, the government transferred thousands of hectares of land and other property to the possession of the Georgian Orthodox Church without compensation. Similarly, churches and religious buildings are transferred into the Georgian Church's ownership without compensation, while the church buildings and mosques are given to religious minorities for rent only for 49 years. The Georgian authorities came under severe criticism for giving the Georgian Orthodox Church unlimited rights.

Dr. Hovhannes Hovhannisyan from Armenia presented a report about the Armenian Church; he accused the Armenian Church of tax avoidance, carrying out activities in army, teaching the history of the Armenian Church in public schools, undue interference with social life. Human rights activist Arthur Sakunts confirmed the accusations made by the speaker, and outlined other allegations against the Armenian Church.

The Primate of the Armenian Diocese in Georgia gave both Hovhannes Hovhannisyan and Artur Sakunts strong response, denying all charges brought against the Armenian Church. The Bishop attached importance to the role and significance of the Armenian Church in the life of the Armenian people, the mission of the Armenian Church in Armenia and in the preservation of the Armenian identity outside of Armenia. He stressed that thanks to the activities carried out by the Armenian clergymen positive changes are taking place in interpersonal military relationships, instilling patriotic spirit among soldiers, that the lesson on religion – the history of the Armenian Church – is a part of Armenian history, that these lessons introduce children to national customs and church rites, and there is growing demand for the Armenian Church every day.

Forum participants also discussed gender equality, the role of women within Christian and Muslim families.

In closing message, the initiators unanimously underlined the significance of similar events, which contribute to mutual respect and cooperation, and decided to expand the geography of participants, involving more and more countries.



