



Delegation of Canada
to the OSCE

Délégation du Canada
auprès de l'OSCE

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As recognized in the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the right to form groups, to organize, and to assemble, with the aim of addressing issues of common concern, is a fundamental human right. This right is an essential pillar of a free and democratic society. In Canada, where the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* affords the highest level of legal protection to these and other human rights, public demonstrations are a recognized and accepted part of our democratic life. Individuals have the legal right to peacefully gather, associate, demonstrate, and protest, as a means of exercising their fundamental right to freedom of expression. We believe strongly that these rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association strengthen our democracy, and that our prosperity relies upon a free and vibrant civil society.

Canada recognizes the vital role played by human rights defenders and civil society advocates in protecting and promoting human rights and strengthening the rule of law. Human rights defenders and civil society advocates help to draw the attention of governments and communities to human rights challenges that need to be addressed. Their work is vital to urging governments to be more accountable, thus supporting better governance and government policy. In this regard, we deplore the threats and harassment that human rights defenders and civil society advocates face on an ongoing basis in many parts of the OSCE area, especially given their courage in denouncing human rights violations, corruption, and attacks against vulnerable populations and civil society itself.

Moreover, we continue to be concerned by the restrictions on freedom of association and peaceful assembly that occurs within the OSCE area. Such restrictions have been increasingly pursued through prohibitory legal frameworks that curtail the registration, funding, and activities of human rights defenders and civil society organizations. We are also very concerned with rising trends of threats, including online, being directed at human rights defenders, which are often disproportionately directed at women human rights defenders. We are seeing more enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, unlawful imprisonment, torture, and unfair trials in the OSCE region.

We can and must combat this increasing threat to human rights defenders and civil society advocates in a concrete and systematic manner. To this end, Canada has recently released public guidelines for our officials on supporting human rights defenders of all types. These guidelines are meant to be a practical instrument to Canadian missions and officials abroad to help empower human rights defenders enabling them to be more effective advocates. We join the OSCE, the EU, and individual States such as the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, the US, and the UK in promulgating guidelines in the hope of better achieving a meaningful impact. It is incumbent on all OSCE participating States, however, to counter all threats to human right defenders and civil society.

In conclusion, it is crucial that OSCE participating States make a conscious effort to support the exercise of fundamental freedoms in their countries. In this regard, we would like to put forward the following three recommendations:

- 1) That OSCE participating States that have not yet done so develop and publicize guidelines for government officials to follow in order to support human rights defenders;
- 2) That participating States ensure that laws, regulations, and practices do not unduly restrict the composition and activities of civil society; and, very importantly,
- 3) That participating States promote and enable an active and effective participation of civil society in multilateral forums, such as today's Human Dimension Implementation Meeting.