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## OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

Warsaw, 1 October 2014

### Working Session 14: Fundamental Freedoms II, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief

Chairman,

The **Forum for Religious Freedom Europe** (FOREF) is an independent, secular, civil society formation dedicated to protecting religious freedom within the framework of international human rights law. We appreciate this opportunity to share a selection of our concerns about current threats to religious freedom in the OSCE region.

- FOREF urges the government of **Azerbaijan** to halt the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses, whose worship services have been disrupted by police officers, and whose members have been fined. Religious texts, including Islamic and Old Testament passages, as well as those of the Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned.
- We deeply regret that **Kazakhstan's** Religion Law is used by the government to censor religious literature. Kazakhstan has recently fined numerous citizens for exercising their freedom of religion, and imprisoned others. FORUM 18, and independent research organization, has documented that seven persons have been jailed already this year, having refused to pay fines levied for their religious expressions. The state exercises an inappropriate control over the legal status of religious communities.

- **Kyrgyzstan** has refused to register the Ahmadi religious community, with officials threatening to persecute any members of the faith worshipping together. The government often refuses to allow members of religious communities to hold religious ceremonies when they bury their dead.
- The **Russian Federation** continues to persecute Jehovah's Witnesses claiming in some cases their literature is "extremist." Russia has been condemned by the European Court of Human Rights for unlawful interference in religious life.
- In **Turkmenistan**, authorities have disrupted gatherings of Evangelical Christian groups, and officials have claimed that singing religious songs is illegal. Members of the Jehovah's Witnesses have been jailed. Government restrictions on religious practice have become harsher. FOREF is gratified that the United States government has classified Turkmenistan as a "Country of Particular Concern" but unfortunately US sanctions on Turkmenistan have already been waived based on "important national interest" issues.
- The political destabilization of **Ukraine** has led to the shelling of churches and the deaths of Orthodox priests. FOREF has received reports of violent crackdowns on Protestant and Catholic Churches by "pro-Russian" militants.
- **Uzbekistan** is another US-designated Country of Particular Concern where the authorities continue to persecute especially followers of non-state approved Muslim communities, but also Baptists and other Christian groups.
- Chairman, the Western parts of the OSCE region have their share of problems when it comes to respecting the freedom of religion. In a separate intervention, FOREF has expressed its concerns about **Hungary**. It is deeply disturbing that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe gave serious consideration to a resolution that would have been deeply discriminatory against minority religions.
- FOREF thinks bans on manifestations of faith like Muslim headscarves, burqas, and Jewish skullcaps are violations of religious freedoms. Despite the fact that the European Court of Human Rights upheld **France's** burqa, we urge OSCE participating States not to follow suit.

Thank you for your attention.