



**OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2013
Warsaw, Poland
September 24, 2013**

**Working Session 2
Statement on behalf of Freedom House**

Good morning. Combatting intolerance and discrimination is a goal to which all OSCE Participating States have agreed, though many are not fully making good on this commitment. We would like to focus our remarks in particular on whether states are preventing intolerance and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in the OSCE space.

Freedom House is alarmed at the growing prevalence of homophobia, discrimination against LGBTI people, and violence based on real or perceived sexual orientation in OSCE Participating States. Legal restrictions and homophobic rhetoric have prevented many citizens of OSCE Participating States from exercising their guaranteed fundamental rights such as the freedoms of assembly, association, and expression. It is especially worrying that in some cases hateful rhetoric is also being used and encouraged by government representatives, which then feeds hate speech and hateful actions throughout society.

The prohibition on so-called propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations, recently enacted in Russia, is a clear effort to silence and shut down voices that acknowledge the existence of LGBTI people and their equality as human beings. The law has been cited by government officials to justify restrictions on LGBT rights organizations, public actions, and activists. Moreover, this law targeting one group in society for special restrictions, along with more than 10 other laws on the regional level, has contributed to the development of a hostile and fearful environment in Russia for LGBTI people. Now, some officials see no problem in making blatantly homophobic statements publicly whereas before they would have seen no reason to make any statement at all.

The author of the ban on homosexual propaganda in Saint Petersburg, Russia attended the Queer Fest event there this past weekend. The event is aimed at celebrating as a community the pride, rights, and lives of LGBT people in Russia. According to reports together with 5 to 6 of his companions, he verbally insulted the guests, calling them “un-Russian” and “animals” and other

hateful names. Such rhetoric is poisonous and only serves to encourage hate and violence against LGBTI people in Russia.

The first step to eliminating homophobic violence and vitriol in Russia is to stop officials of a government which has committed to non-discrimination based on any characteristic and respect for the enjoyment of fundamental freedoms from spreading such hateful messages. Tolerance and non-discrimination should be included in education at all levels, and in trainings for elected and non-elected officials, so that they understand what discrimination is and how it can be prevented and eliminated.

In Ukraine, which holds the OSCE chairmanship, representatives have apparently stepped back from the brink and are no longer officially considering a ban on propaganda of same-sex sexual relations. Efforts to amend Ukraine's ban on discrimination in the workplace to include sexual orientation as an impermissible basis, however, have also faltered. It is imperative that Ukraine passes this amendment and that the EU hold Ukraine to its commitments, if it is to live up to European standards. The OSCE and Participating States should continue to work with Ukraine to see that it passes relevant legislation to ensure that LGBTI people are not discriminated against, in the workplace or anywhere.

OSCE Participating States, many of which have struggled with similar problems of homophobia and discrimination, have useful and instructive experience in how to tackle these challenges through law, education, and cultural change. It is important for countries to engage Russia and Ukraine, and indeed wherever and whenever anti-LGBTI initiatives arise, on a bilateral and multilateral basis to share useful and effective approaches in tackling violence, homophobia, and discrimination against LGBTI people. Hateful speech about LGBTI people, especially by officials, must always be condemned.

Discrimination or targeting of LGBT people and their advocates is an affront to many of the most fundamental human dimension commitments, among them non-discrimination, equality and tolerance; democratic participation and rights; and fundamental human rights. It is vitally important that all OSCE Participating States mobilize when these principles are threatened and take concrete action to ensure that rights are secured and protected throughout the OSCE. We are heartened to see that the OSCE is at the forefront of this effort and Freedom House stands ready to assist.

Thank you.