

I would like to propose a question to this body: where do human rights come from? I ask the question sincerely and would really enjoy some discussion on this question. Because quite frankly, it is at the core of how civil society and the state approach the protection of these "rights." Do they come from the OSCE? Or how about the Universal Declaration on Human Rights? Is it because they were written down that we have these rights? Or perhaps they come from the state? But then again if these rights come from the state, well then, I would presume that these rights can be taken away by the state. Such a situation would put the state in a very powerful position, for it not only holds the keys to the tanks but also to the essentials of humanity.

But what if they come from something above the state? What if the right to conscience and thought and belief really is something that belongs to human beings - to individuals? What if the right to associate is defined as the right of an individual to gather with others to share or debate thoughts, ideas, and beliefs? And what about the right to expression? Is it something that the state allows us to do or is it something that is a natural and essential aspect of our being and our beliefs?

I'd like to quickly read Art. 1 of the UDHR: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."<sup>1</sup>

Note well that the UDHR itself states that the source of our rights is within our human dignity. Some understand that to mean God, others understand that as humanity or an untouchable set of mores. But regardless, we should all be able to notice that the UDHR does not say that these rights or even our reason and conscience come from the governments sitting around this table. These rights come from something above the state. The UDHR does however call us to act with a spirit of brotherhood, i.e. to look out for one another, to protect each other, to help one another. Hence the role of civil society, which is tasked with the responsibility of holding states and other citizens alike accountable to the protection of the human rights.

And so, I think it is important as we deliberate the role of civil society, that we remember what and why we are protecting these fundamental freedoms.

If the right to associate comes from the right of an individual to gather with

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<sup>1</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Art. 1.

The involvement of civil society was essential to the discussion, but how seriously were their proposals taken by member-states? Regardless of how seriously they were considered, it