



Closing remarks by Ambassador Janez Lenarčič
Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions
and Human Rights (ODIHR)

III Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting
on Freedom of Assembly and Association
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Check against delivery!

Excellencies, Distinguished Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our Keynote Speaker, Mr. Maina Kiai and our introducers for the stimulating presentations. I would further like to express my thanks to the moderators of all three sessions for their excellent work in streamlining debates, as well as all participants for the rich and active discussions and exchanges that have taken place over the last one and a half days. Also, my gratitude goes to the Irish Chairmanship, for the excellent co-operation in organizing this event, and the Civil Society Forum preceding this Meeting. I would also like to thank the OSCE Secretariat in Vienna, which provided valuable support to us in the organization of these events, and to all ODIHR staff who worked so hard to make them happen. Last but not least, my heartfelt thanks go out to the interpreters for this event, without whom the lively discussions that took place at all three working sessions would not have been possible.

This Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting was attended by more than 240 persons, with roughly half representing OSCE participating States and Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation, and the other half coming from civil society from these countries, and international organizations. Such high attendance shows the importance of the issues that we have been discussing. To the participants of this Meeting, I would like to express my deep appreciation for the very pertinent recommendations that you have made at this event; they provide practical and very necessary suggestions as to how participating States and OSCE institutions can contribute to the full implementation of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. I would also like to thank the participants of the Civil Society Forum preceding this Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting for the very relevant recommendations and conclusions that they presented at the relevant working sessions yesterday and today, the most of which were also reiterated by other interlocutors at the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting. For example, they have recommended that OSCE participating States create a legal framework that will safeguard NGO activities and facilitate their institutional sustainability, notably through tax exemptions and the removal of obstacles to international financial assistance to NGOs. The Civil Society Forum also called for ODIHR to produce guidelines on freedom of association, ideally together with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission. With regard to freedom of assembly, the Civil Society Forum underlined that participating States should refrain from burdensome requirements to the organization of peaceful assemblies and proposed that ODIHR develop a tool for training law enforcement officials on policing assemblies.

We at ODIHR will most certainly do our best to assist OSCE participating States in following up on the conclusions and recommendations made to them, and will take those pertaining to the OSCE and its institutions into account in our programmatic activities.

In relation to the fundamental right of freedom of assembly, we have heard many interventions highlighting the challenges that still persist in the OSCE region, and were also provided with interesting insights into the situation in some of our Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation. I trust ODIHR's freedom of assembly monitoring report has contributed to these discussions and to a more accurate picture of the state of this fundamental freedom in the OSCE area. Monitoring activities undertaken by ODIHR have shown that issues remain in the OSCE region regarding burdensome authorization procedures for public assemblies, the existence of blanket bans on assemblies, the inadequate policing of counter-demonstrations, and the excessive use of force by law enforcement officials. ODIHR was also encouraged by civil society organizations and participating States to continue monitoring assemblies across the OSCE region, and we shall do so.

I can only reiterate that it is of paramount importance that participating States ensure that peaceful assemblies can take place without undue State interference or harassment of organizers and participants. These include restrictions relating to the number of participants, the location, the duration or the message of the assembly. Legislation that is not compliant

with these principles should be reviewed. ODIHR stands ready to assist in these efforts, by continuing to provide support to legal reform efforts throughout the OSCE region, to monitor assemblies and to work with NGOs active in the area of freedom of peaceful assembly. The tools that ODIHR has developed for this purpose, namely the Guidelines on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly, drafted together with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, contain good examples of standards and good practices across the OSCE region. In this context, I should also mention ODIHR's Panel of Experts on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly, which provides advice and support in relation to all matters pertaining to the exercise of the right to peaceful assembly.

Likewise, the freedom of association should not be subjected to excessive regulation; registration of associations, including non-governmental organizations, should only be of a technical nature and the general operation of civil society organizations should be facilitated by the authorities in a transparent and non-discriminatory manner. ODIHR stands ready to support OSCE participating States in their efforts to reform legislation and policy to protect and promote the right to association.

Regarding the role of new technologies, and specifically the use of the Internet and social networks for civil society representatives and individuals to organize themselves into assemblies or associations on- and offline, participating States should ensure that new technologies are not used in such a way as to interfere with the exercise of the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly. Any limitations on internet and mobile technologies should be both narrowly tailored in domestic law and in full compliance with international human rights law.

This Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting has provided OSCE participating States with much food for thought and recommendations on how they can better implement their commitments pertaining to freedom of association and peaceful assembly in line with international standards. We strongly encourage all participating States to take the conclusions and recommendations resulting from this meeting seriously, and to follow up on them, with the assistance of OSCE institutions in line with their mandates.

Thank you for your kind attention.