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Contribution to working session 14: Fundamental freedoms I, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief
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The importance of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief for all¹

The right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief for every human being is protected by Articles 18 of the ICCPR and UDHR². It is also included in the commitments that OSCE member states have undertaken in Principle VII of the Helsinki Final Act³, and in the Vienna Concluding Document⁴.

Despite this, there are a number of OSCE members who continue to deny their citizens full freedom of thought, religion or belief. For example, whilst their constitutions protect the right to this freedom, in practice, many Central Asian states violate it. Through mechanisms such as: limitations on freedom of speech on religious issues; laws which tightly regulate and restrict how religious organizations may operate; the prohibition of any participation in unregistered religious activities; and legally-sanctioned privileged access for specific religious groups to shaping legislation⁵.

Another violation of the right to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression comes in the form of pernicious anti-blasphemy laws. These exist in a number of OSCE countries – some carrying a potential prison sentence – including Russia, Greece and Turkey, and work in diametric opposition to the human rights standards expected of OSCE members⁶.

Notably, freedom of religion or belief applies to a broad variety of beliefs, not just those of predefined “classical” religions⁷. However, the right to free thought of those with *no* religion is, by many, either forgotten or knowingly violated. One well-known example is that of Kazakhstan’s Aleksandr Kharlamov, an atheist journalist who was imprisoned for expressing his non-religious beliefs and now faces a possible seven years in prison⁸.

¹ This statement is based upon the International Humanist and Ethical Union’s written statement to the 2th UN Human Rights Council (A/HRC/25/NGO/64)

² See: <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx> and <http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/0/9a30112c27d1167cc12563ed004d8f15>

³ <http://www.osce.org/mc/39501?download=true>

⁴ <http://fas.org/nuke/control/osce/text/VIENN89E.htm>

⁵ <http://freethoughtreport.com/> - see sections on: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan,

⁶ <http://freethoughtreport.com/> - see sections on: Greece, Russia and Turkey

⁷ A/HRC/25/58, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

⁸ <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68375>, http://en.rsf.org/kazakhstan-authorities-again-urged-to-drop-05-09-2013_45141.html

Discrimination against the non-religious is often caused by the desire to help one or more religion. Religious privilege is one of the most common forms of discrimination against those with no religion. Freedom of religion or belief requires equal and just treatment of all people irrespective of their beliefs. When states start defining citizens not by their humanity but narrowly by their membership of a religious group, such as through education, taxation or public services for example, prioritising conformity to preconceived beliefs, then discrimination and sectarianism automatically follow.

We urge all OSCE members to fully honour their commitments on freedom of religion and belief, ensuring their citizens can practice and express their beliefs freely and without fear of reprisal.