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Freedom of Religion or Belief
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Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) – a non-governmental organisation promoting freedom of religion or belief for all through research and advocacy – is concerned about the widespread violations of religious freedom across the OSCE region, affecting individuals and religious and belief communities alike. These infringements can occur at legislative, judicial, policy and/or societal levels, with the tacit or direct support of States, non-state actors or both. Such violations include, *inter alia*, administrative hurdles for religious or belief communities in obtaining legal personality, harassment and discriminatory treatment of representatives of minority or non-traditional religious or belief groups, and interference in internal affairs of such groups.

CSW believes that freedom of religion or belief is interdependent of other human rights and that it is a precondition for societal peace, democracy and sustainable development. In line with the 2012 *Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence*¹, we are convinced of the mutually reinforcing dimensions of freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression. We call upon participating States to implement the recommendations in the Rabat Plan of Action with regards to legislation, jurisprudence and policies. This includes the understanding that limitation of speech must remain an exception. It also means that well-defined laws and procedures need to be in place in order to prevent hate speech and ensuing violence and impunity. In the spirit of the Rabat Plan of Action, we encourage participating States to promote an environment conducive to intercultural understanding, dialogue, and respect for diversity, through education, training and public debate.

Another positive contribution to the promotion of freedom of religion or belief is the new European Union (EU) *Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief*² (2013), developed in consultation with civil society organisations, including CSW in cooperation with the European Platform on Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID), Forum 18 and the Swedish Mission Council. We call upon the EU to ensure effective implementation of these Guidelines, including mainstreaming, training and institutional cooperation, such as sharing of best practices with the OSCE and the Council of Europe. It is crucial that the EU and OSCE act in complementary and cooperative ways in the promotion of this right. Regular dialogues and exchanges of views, in person and in writing, should occur. Moreover, civil society operating at different levels across the OSCE region should be consulted in a systematic way.

¹ http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/SeminarRabat/Rabat_draft_outcome.pdf.

² http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137585.pdf.

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Finally, we are pleased that the ODIHR is engaged in developing new Guidelines concerning recognition of religious and belief communities. We call upon the participating States to implement the recommendations in the forthcoming Guidelines, as well as existing OSCE commitments in this field.

CSW recommends participating States, OSCE institutions and field operations:

- To implement the recommendations in the Rabat Plan of Action, ensuring that State legislation, jurisprudence and policies regarding incitement to violence on religion or belief grounds are in line with international human rights law;
- To promote an environment conducive to intercultural dialogue, understanding and respect for diversity, through education, training and public debate;
- To develop resources and compile best practices, through cooperation and information sharing with the UN and other regional mechanisms, including with the EU and Council of Europe, and to make best use of existing tools such as the Rabat Plan of Action, the EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief, the ODIHR/Venice Commission Guidelines for Review of Legislation pertaining to Religion or Belief, and the future ODIHR Guidelines on Recognition of Religious or Belief Communities.