



## Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting

### on Freedom of Religion or Belief: the Role of Digital Technologies and Civil Society actors In Advancing This Human Right For All

9-10 November 2020

(online)

### ANNOTATED AGENDA

#### BACKGROUND

The right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief is a multi-faceted human right, embracing individual, collective, institutional, educative and communicative dimensions, and is expressly recognized in OSCE commitments<sup>1</sup> and international and regional standards.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of the OSCE, a commitment to respect, protect and fulfil the right to freedom of religion or belief constitutes one of the Organization's original tenets dating back to the Helsinki Final Act of 1975. It is specifically acknowledged as one of the fundamental principles guiding mutual relations among OSCE participating States and an integral aspect of the OSCE's concept of security<sup>3</sup>.

OSCE participating States have elaborated an extensive and detailed set of commitments in the area of freedom of religion or belief. Equally, they have made a commitment to take effective

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<sup>1</sup> For OSCE commitments and international standards see p. 12 of the ODIHR Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security Policy Guidance: <<https://www.osce.org/odihr/429389>>.

<sup>2</sup> UN General Assembly, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 16 December 1966, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 999, p. 171 (hereafter, "ICCPR"), Article 18, <<http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinter-est/pages/ccpr.aspx>>; Council of Europe, European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, as amended by Protocols Nos. 11 and 14, 4 November 1950 (hereafter, "ECHR"), Article 9, <<https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/005>>;

<sup>3</sup> OSCE Ministerial Council Decision adopted in Kyiv (2013) specifically emphasized "the link between security and full respect for freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief."

measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination against individuals or communities on the grounds of religion or belief<sup>4</sup>.

Despite the commitments of participating States to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief and to foster a climate of mutual tolerance and respect between believers of different communities, as well as between believers and non-believers<sup>5</sup>, the right to freedom of religion or belief remains under significant pressure in the OSCE region, with differing impacts on men and women, as a result of the actions of State authorities and non-State actors.

Most recently, the introduction of emergency measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and the continuous rapid digitization of many spheres of life have instigated both challenges and opportunities to advance this human right for all. These trends have profound implications for future policies, laws and practices pertaining to the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Whilst OSCE participating States have the primary responsibility for guaranteeing freedom of religion or belief for all, a State cannot create and sustain a culture of respect for diversity of religions and beliefs only by itself. Religious or belief communities, civil society organizations, including faith-based and other organizations, national human rights institutions and equality bodies, academia, educational professionals, social media companies and the media all have an important role to play as part of comprehensive efforts to advance the right to freedom of religion or belief and address intolerance and discrimination on grounds of religion or belief.

Experience from around the OSCE region shows that this human right is best advanced in an environment in which participating States enable awareness-raising activities, educational programmes, interfaith and interreligious dialogue and partnerships, dialogue and engagement between the State and religious or belief communities, in which civil society coalitions<sup>6</sup> are active in addressing discrimination and fostering more tolerant societies, and digital technologies are harnessed to foster respect for religious and belief diversity.

In light of the above, the third Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting will explore the current state of freedom of religion or belief in the OSCE region, the opportunities that exist to advance it for the benefit of all believers and non-believers, and the challenges that impede the realization of this aim, including the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, it will examine the implications of recent trends for national legal frameworks and policies relating to freedom of religion or belief; explore the challenges and opportunities pertaining to the rapid digitization and

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<sup>4</sup> For example, OSCE Ministerial Council Decisions adopted at Porto (2002), Maastricht (2003), Sofia (2004), Ljubljana (2005), Brussels (2006), Madrid (2007) and Athens (2009)

<sup>5</sup> Eg Budapest 1994.

<sup>6</sup> See ODIHR's Coalition Building for Tolerance and Non-Discrimination: A Practical Guide: <<https://www.osce.org/odihr/385017>>

its impact on the enjoyment of this right; and consider the role of civil society actors, including religious or belief communities, in advancing the right to freedom of religion or belief for all in the OSCE region.

## **Day 1**

15.00 – 16.00

### **OPENING SESSION**

*Opening remarks*

*Introductory addresses*

*Technical information*

16.00 – 18.00

### **SESSION I: The State of Freedom of Religion or Belief in the OSCE Region: Challenges and Opportunities**

Full compliance with OSCE commitments and international standards on freedom of religion or belief has several benefits that are conducive to comprehensive and sustainable security. For example, freedom of religion or belief, together with other human rights, particularly freedom of opinion and expression, contributes to the creation of an environment in which messages denouncing hatred, intolerance and violence can be voiced. It also mobilizes individuals and communities professing different convictions to contribute to the development of their societies.

Progress in recent years in some important areas related to freedom of religion or belief in the OSCE region, such as legislation that conforms more fully to international standards and commitments, has been made. Further, a considerable range of institutional developments and other activities have emerged, such as the appointment by a number of participating States of Special Envoys or Ambassadors working on freedom of religion or belief and related issues; the creation of informal networks for exchange among participating States on freedom of religion or belief issues; and the formation of roundtables and local coalitions to advance this human right for all and address intolerance and discrimination on grounds of religion or belief.

Despite these developments, undue interferences with the exercise of this universal human right in the OSCE region, such as practical and legal obstacles to acquiring legal personality for religious or belief communities, unwarranted intrusion into the internal affairs of religious or belief groups, and wholesale restrictions on the import and distribution of religious literature, continue to unduly restrict the freedom of religion or belief of men and women, often enacted in the name of “national”, “public” or “state” security beyond permissible limitations under international law.

Moreover, across the OSCE region individuals and communities continue to be victims of discrimination, hate crimes and “hate speech” due to their religion or belief. Many religious and belief communities continue to report, despite the efforts of participating States to prevent and

respond to hatred and hostility, that intolerance and discrimination continues to exist in various forms, including discriminatory practices, hate speech, physical threats and assaults<sup>7</sup>.

More recently, the imposition of extraordinary measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic in the OSCE area has had profound ramifications for the ability of individuals, believers and non-believers, and communities to access places of worship, observe religious holidays, participate in religious rituals, gather in homes for worship, and partake in activities of an educational nature. Physical distancing has also hampered the efforts of religious or belief communities to undertake charitable and humanitarian work. Moreover, a discernable upsurge in negative stereotyping, stigmatization, discrimination, and incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence on grounds of religion or belief heightens a sense of insecurity among religious or belief communities<sup>8</sup>.

Nevertheless and despite the far-reaching restrictions imposed on them in recent months, religious or belief communities throughout the OSCE region have played a key and strategic role in combating the health crisis by supporting health services, reinforcing the advice and guidance of public health authorities and assisting the most vulnerable members of our societies, as well by articulating messages of solidarity and hope and countering misinformation about the source and spread of the virus. The efforts to combat the pandemic have also spearheaded a much needed and constructive dialogue and collaboration between governments and religious or belief communities and civil society.<sup>9</sup>

This working session will explore the state of freedom of religion or belief in the OSCE region. It will also examine the implications of the current situation for future laws and policies on this universal human right and will aim to identify how participating States, religious or belief communities and other relevant stakeholders can advance the right to freedom of religion or belief for all in the OSCE region.

### **Questions for discussion:**

- How have the recent trends affected the enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief in the OSCE region of men, women, and youth?
- What lessons can be learned from the efforts of participating States to combat the pandemic for the respect for freedom of religion or belief?
- How can OSCE institutions and executive structures better assist and support participating States, religious or belief communities, civil society organizations and other relevant stakeholders in their efforts to advance freedom of religion or belief for all in the OSCE region?

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://hatecrime.osce.org/>

<sup>8</sup> See OSCE Human Dimension Commitments and State Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic, <<https://www.osce.org/odihr/human-rights-states-of-emergency-covid19>>, pp.116-119.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Day 2**

10.30 – 12.30

### **SESSION II: The Role of Digital Technologies in Advancing the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief: Challenges and Opportunities**

Digital technologies can play an integral role in the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief for all. Digitization can lower barriers to the exercise of freedom of religion or belief, as digital tools can help those who have been fearful in the past of participating publicly in religious activities or admitting their membership of a particular community. Digital tools also enable connectivity for believers and non-believers within and across borders and facilitate the communicative aspect of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Conversely, technology can also be used to limit the right to freedom of religion or belief. Tools such as surveillance technologies, including facial-recognition systems and smartphone tracking, open possibilities for increased surveillance, monitoring, and the collection of digital footprints and biometric information for profiling purposes. Advanced computing platforms and artificial intelligence (AI) can be utilized to accumulate and recognize patterns in the data on religious or belief communities, while algorithmic decision-making may be based on human biases that are difficult to identify and overcome.<sup>10</sup> The reliance on AI-driven solutions on biased data can result in perpetuating discrimination of individuals and communities on grounds of religion or belief.<sup>11</sup>

Social media platforms may also contribute to an upsurge in incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, conspiracy theories and scapegoating, and amplify social hostilities based on religion or belief, as the digital space risks becoming a forum for spreading misinformation and hatred.

Governments, religious or belief communities, as well as civil society organizations and the social media companies themselves, all have an important role to play in supporting the promotion and protection of this right and addressing intolerance and discrimination on grounds of religion or belief, through digital means.

This working session will explore both the challenges and opportunities pertaining to digitization and its impact on the enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief for all

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the European Commission White Paper on Artificial Intelligence  
<[https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/commission-white-paper-artificial-intelligence-feb2020\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/commission-white-paper-artificial-intelligence-feb2020_en.pdf)>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

in the OSCE region. It will seek to explore the role that governments, religious or belief communities, as well as civil society organizations and the social media companies can play in advancing the right to freedom of religion or belief online.

**Questions for discussion:**

- What recent trends have emerged at the intersection of digitization and freedom of religion or belief?
- What are the benefits and risks of digitization for advancing the right to freedom of religion or belief for men, women, and youth?
- What role can governments, religious or belief communities, as well as civil society organizations and the social media companies play in advancing the right to freedom of religion or belief for all online? What are some of the good practices in this regard?

14.30 – 16.30

**SESSION III: The Role of Civil Society in Advancing the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief for All**

In recent years, a considerable range of activities and initiatives involving civil society actors, including religious or belief communities and faith-based organizations, to advance freedom of religion or belief and promote peaceful coexistence among individuals and communities of different religions and beliefs has emerged in the OSCE region.

These include coalitions and networks to address intolerance, discrimination and hate crimes towards all marginalized communities; advocacy efforts with State authorities to advance freedom of religion or belief and address intolerance and discrimination on grounds of religion or belief; contribution to the development and implementation of awareness-raising programmes to inform broader society about the existence of religious and belief diversity and about religious or belief communities and their human rights; and the use of social media and online platforms to promote a culture of religious tolerance and understanding and a deeper appreciation of the nature and significance of freedom of religion or belief.

Interfaith and interreligious dialogue and partnerships are another prominent example of how civil society action can serve to address the root causes of religious intolerance, promote and protect freedom of religion or belief for all and foster environments of trust, mutual respect and understanding among believers and non-believers.

This working session will explore the role of civil society actors in advancing the right to freedom of religion or belief for all in the OSCE region. It will also provide an opportunity for sharing good practices in relation to activities and initiatives involving civil society actors, including coalitions involving religious or belief actors and interfaith and interreligious dialogue

and partnerships, to address intolerance and discrimination on grounds of religion or belief and to advance this human right for all in the OSCE region.

**Questions for discussion:**

- What good practice examples of activities and initiatives involving civil society actors to advance freedom of religion or belief and promote peaceful coexistence among individuals and communities of different religions and beliefs have recently emerged?
- What factors are conducive to the sustainability of effective interfaith and interreligious dialogue and partnerships and civil society coalitions aimed at addressing intolerance and discrimination on grounds of religion or belief and advancing freedom of religion or belief for all?
- How can OSCE institutions and executive structures better assist and support civil society efforts in advancing the right to freedom of religion or belief?

16.30 – 17.30      **CLOSING SESSION**

*Rapports from the working sessions*

*Comments from the floor*

*Closing remarks*

17.30              Closing of the meeting

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