



EUROPEAN UNION

**OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2012
Warsaw, 1 October 2012**

EU statement – Sessions 10-11

**FREEDOM OF THOUGHT, CONSCIENCE, RELIGION OR BELIEF
(SPECIFICALLY SELECTED TOPIC)**

Madam Moderator,

The European Union attaches the greatest importance to freedom of religion or belief and made it one of its priorities under its human rights foreign policy. Freedom of religion or belief applies equally to all persons, independent of the prevailing religious identity in society, and independent from their nature of religion or belief. The EU is of the opinion that the freedom of religion or belief comprehends individual rights, as well as the collective right of religious communities to organise themselves. The European Union works, through all its actions, to ensure observance of the universal nature of this freedom, which concerns the right of a person to adopt, to change, or to abandon one's religion or belief, including the right to live without religious conviction or activity.

The European Union welcomes the progress that many OSCE participating States have made towards implementing their commitment to protect the freedom of religion or belief. Implementation of OSCE commitments remains a key priority for the EU, which is reflected by the embedding of freedom of religion or belief within the EU human rights strategic framework and action plan, adopted on June 25.

As a concrete action deriving from that plan, the European Union started the drafting of new guidelines, which will be instrumental for the European Union and its partners in promoting freedom of religion or belief. Furthermore, freedom of religion or belief continues to feature prominently in the overall EU human rights policy, in bilateral meetings, EU Human Rights Dialogues and EU efforts at multilateral fora.

The European Union expresses its concern that serious instances of intolerance and discrimination on the ground of religion or belief, including acts of violence, intimidation and coercion against individuals and members of religious communities, continue to occur in parts of the OSCE area. The European Union believes that there is an urgent need for vigilance and action against intolerance and violence against any member of any religious community. The promotion and protection of rights of persons belonging to religious minorities deserve specific attention and need to be addressed in the most efficient manner. We emphasise that the freedom to manifest religion or belief should be in conformity with public safety, order, or the fundamental freedoms of others. The European Union stresses that intra- and interreligious dialogue and cooperation is key to foster a climate of religious tolerance, but can't substitute freedom of religion or belief as an indispensable human right protection for each and every individual. The European Union underlines the importance of education and continued and strengthened dialogue among individuals belonging to religions or beliefs in order to promote greater tolerance, respect and mutual understanding. The European Union stresses the active role civil society can play in this respect, and calls on all states, in all circumstances, to put in place conditions for the safeguarding of freedom of religion or belief.

Notwithstanding the remaining challenges, the European Union commends advances made in protecting and implementing the freedom of religion or belief over the past years. The European Union expresses its warm support for the vital contribution of the ODIHR in this regard and commends ODIHR's efforts to make its Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief more inclusive, transparent and efficient. We welcome the existing cooperation of the OSCE with the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, also in reviewing relevant legislation of the participating States. The European Union stands ready to continue and further promote constructive cooperation and coordination with these bodies and is committed to keep freedom of religion or belief at the core of its human rights agenda.

The Acceding Country Croatia*, the Candidate Countries the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, Montenegro*, Iceland+ and Serbia*, the Countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidates Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EFTA country Norway, member of the European Economic Area, as well as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Armenia, Georgia, Andorra and San Marino, align themselves with this statement.

** Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.*

+ Iceland continues to be a member of the EFTA and of the European Economic Area.