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Recommendations to OSCE participating states concerning freedom of religion or belief

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Why implement freedom of religion or belief commitments?

Freedom of religion or belief (FORB) is a fundamental human right. As with other fundamental rights, FORB benefits all as it contributes to creating the conditions required for peace, democratisation and development and for the promotion of other human rights.

Research indicates that there is a statistically significant relation between limitations in religious freedom and the frequency of armed conflicts. Limitations to religious freedom contribute to polarisation between communities and encourage extremist groups whilst limiting the ability of moderate religious voices to take part in public debate and public life. In addition state discrimination towards religious groups legitimises violence and discrimination practiced by other groups in society. When states on the other hand take responsibility and actively work to secure religious freedom, the risk for conflict in society is reduced.

Limitations to religious freedom create socio-economic discrimination and reduce citizens' ability to come together and become actors for change. Gatherings to manifest religious beliefs are perhaps the most common form of public gathering in the world. Faith based movements and organisations enable people at grassroots level to come together and solve problems together. Faith based actors can therefore make important contributions to both democratisation and poverty reduction. The promotion of religious freedom enables religious groups to make positive contributions to these processes.

Freedom of religion or belief is important both as a right in itself and as a means to achieve security, democratisation and social and economic development. It is not a special interest for minorities but a something enjoyed by all and the common concern of all who wish to further the development of society.

Despite this 75% of the world's population live in countries where the state or other actors in society seriously limit citizens' freedom to believe, learn about belief or manifest belief. This negatively affects all faith communities, including atheists and affects both minorities and majorities. Sadly, several OSCE participating states are responsible for major violations of the freedom of religion or belief and other related rights, of which we hear examples today.

Recommendations for participating states

Given the importance of promoting religious freedom for the attainment of security, democratisation and poverty reduction the Swedish Mission Council calls upon participating states to:

In domestic policy

- Implement their OSCE commitments concerning freedom of religion or belief.
- Make full use of the expertise, systems and tools for the promotion of FORB available via the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and in particular:

- Seek and take account of the advice of the OSCE advisory panel of experts when reviewing or framing legislation concerning religion or belief and to react in the permanent council when other participating states do not take account of such advice.
- Widely disseminate and make use of the OSCE tools for the promotion of religious freedom, in particular the “Guidelines for the review of legislation pertaining to religion or belief” and the “Toledo Guiding principles on teaching about religion or belief in public schools”.

In national foreign policy

- Prioritise the integration freedom of religion or belief in foreign affairs policy and practice.
- Place particular emphasis on training foreign ministry personnel on FORB issues
- Instruct relevant embassies to:
 - Assess the state of and monitor and report on violations of religious freedom in the country concerned
 - Regularly discuss religious freedom issues with states as an integrated part of their overall policy for the promotion of human rights.
 - Develop contacts with defenders of freedom of religion or belief
 - Deepen the embassy’s dialogue with OSCE field missions on FORB issues.
 - Defend the freedom of religion or belief in public diplomacy.
- Increase the level of project funding allocated to the programmes and projects of the ODIHR departments for Human Rights and for Tolerance and Non-discrimination, with particular focus on projects relating for the freedom of religion or belief.
- Provide financial assistance to voluntary organisations and religious communities to contribute to ODIHRs work with FORB and non-discrimination.

In EU foreign policy

The EU is currently preparing public Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief as a tool to strengthen EU foreign policy in this area. The Swedish Mission Council therefore encourages EU member states to:

- Actively contribute to the development of the guidelines and to their implementation.
- Ensure that EU strategy to promote freedom of religion or belief includes three key ways of working
 - Mainstreaming: Ensure freedom of religion or belief is integrated in all relevant EU human rights Country Strategies. Delegations to the OSCE who today hear of violations should play an active role in checking that the issues are raised in relevant country strategies.
 - Intensive action in selected countries: Push for the development of an intensive and coordinated programme of action in relation to a small number of selected countries. Action should combine diplomacy with financing research, civil society action and inter-faith dialogue in a multi-disciplinary, multi-actor approach.
 - Thematic focus: Ensure that the EU moves beyond reactive agendas and begins proactively raising thematic issues within freedom of religion or belief at bilateral, OSCE and UN level. Rights of assembly and association for religious

communities, apostasy, blasphemy restrictions and gender dimensions of freedom of religion or belief are examples of relevant thematic areas to address.

- Recognise the limited resources of the European External Action Service and commit to burden sharing in the promotion of freedom of religion or belief via these three methods.

Recommendation for OSCE field missions

In addition the Swedish Mission Council encourages OSCE field missions to make fuller use of the expertise, systems and tools for the promotion of FORB available via the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

The Swedish Mission Council

The Swedish Mission Council is a broad ecumenical body of 34 member churches and organisations ranging from Orthodox, Roman Catholic and numerous protestant churches to church based development and mission agencies. Our members and the organisations they cooperate with have wide ranging experience of for various forms of limitation to religious freedom and of how these limitations exacerbate conflict and deepen poverty. SMC is therefore committed to working to promote for religious freedom for all.

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