

OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2019
Working Session 6 – Statement by the Delegation of Canada, delivered by Counsellor Daniel
Barbarie, Thursday, September 19, 2019

Moderator,

My delegation said earlier this week that democracy was more than just the holding of elections. One key component of a functioning, healthy democracy is the ability for citizens to freely and peacefully assemble and associate. It is the means by which individuals and public groups can express their views to leaders and others; and in so doing, promote public discourse and diversity as a peaceful tool to achieve changes in society.

Last year, Canada welcomed ODIHR monitoring of the G7 Summit in Charlevoix, Quebec. The final report of ODIHR's monitoring will be available shortly, and we will carefully review the suggestions presented directly to us, and more broadly to all participating States. All states have room to improve their implementation of freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and Canada is no exception. The first step, however, is the recognition of the importance of free and peaceful assembly and association. Unfortunately, for too many states in the OSCE region, the right to freely assemble and organize, in much the same way as media freedom, is treated as threat to be countered, as opposed to an essential foundation of a free and democratic society. We have observed disproportionate police responses to peaceful protests, as well as onerous restrictions on the right to assembly, and overly harsh punishments directed to protesters or demonstrators. A recent dispiriting example of this was seen in Moscow over the summer and we reiterate our call to the Russian Federation to ensure full respect for freedom of peaceful assembly and expression. Additionally, restrictive legal frameworks, as seen in Russia and Central Asia, curtail the registration, funding, and activities of civil society organizations. The shrinking space for civil society leads to a resultant decrease in the ability to freely assemble and organize. Civil society, as a vehicle for advocacy and civic participation in the development and implementation of government policies and programs, plays a key part in holding governments to account and facilitating and encouraging peaceful assembly and association.

In closing, in addition to calling for participating States to respect their OSCE commitments, we would put forward the following recommendations for this session:

- 1) That ODIHR increase their training activities with law enforcement bodies in participating States, ensuring that police respond with appropriate de-escalatory measures when dealing with peaceful assemblies.
- 2) That OSCE participating States review their existing laws on freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and to update or overturn those that unduly limit this right.
- 3) That OSCE participating States ensure that the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association is respected equally in digital contexts, and that citizens are free to assemble and organize online like they are offline.