



## EUROPEAN UNION

# OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting

## *Freedom of Religion or Belief, Fostering Mutual Respect and Understanding*

### Vienna, 2-3 July 2015

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### EU Statement

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1. The European Union welcomes the decision of the Serbian Chairmanship to devote a Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting to the issue of freedom of religion and belief. It is a topic that remains highly relevant to the work of the OSCE and is a priority for the EU both inside and outside of the OSCE. The EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief, agreed in 2013, continue to guide our work in this area.
2. It is over twenty five years since OSCE participating States agreed the 1989 Concluding Document of the Vienna Meeting– a milestone text on freedom of religion or belief both within the OSCE and more widely. During the intervening period, many of the challenges to freedom of religion and belief manifest then have persisted, and new ones have also arisen. Whilst the 2013 OSCE Ministerial Council Decision on Freedom of Religion or Belief was a positive step forward, much more can still be done.
3. Lack of full implementation of OSCE and other international commitments continues to constitute a significant barrier to the full enjoyment of the freedom of religion or belief. Some religious communities, especially communities that constitute a minority in a state, continue to have problems establishing places of worship. Other are restricted from freely imparting religious education to worshippers, or from gaining a legal personality.
4. Individuals and communities also face discrimination on the basis of their religion, belief or non-belief. This can emanate from State policies or the lack of appropriate accommodation of their needs. One example is the registration of religious or belief communities. Sometimes the rules governing such registration, and the arbitrary manner in which they are exercised by the public authorities, means certain individuals or communities are unable to register and as a consequence are unduly denied their rights.



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5. Another concerning trend is the application of extremism laws, which are sometimes used to stifle the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief. This is sometimes justified on the grounds of upholding security. However, there is no dichotomy between freedom of religion or belief and security. Rather they are interrelated. Indeed, the promotion of freedom of religion or belief and inter-religious dialogue offers a valuable means to counter extremism.
6. A further false dichotomy is the one that is increasingly presented between freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief. Again, both freedoms underpin one another. You cannot enjoy freedom of religion or belief without the fundamental freedom to receive information or express an opinion. At the same time, government restrictions on media freedom can have the effect of not only violating the right to freedom of expression but also limit the ability of citizens to exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief.
7. The EU believes a collaborative approach centred on dialogue and partnership is the most effective means for the OSCE to address the challenges to freedom of religion or belief facing our region. Dialogue across national, regional or religious borders is essential to promote mutual respect and understanding. Dialogue is needed between state authorities and representatives of religious groups, as well as between different groups in society. Only through dialogue can there be understanding between believers and non-believers.
8. In this regard, the role of civil society cannot be stressed enough. Religious communities all over the OSCE region are important civil society actors and their representatives are in many cases also active human rights defenders. When states restrict the work of human rights activists or seek to narrow the space for a vibrant independent civil society, they often restrict too the activities of belief communities. Rather than restrict the work of civil society, we need to work in partnership with them. Civil society continue to play a crucial role in bringing key issues to the attention of governments and in holding States accountable for the commitments they have undertaken.
9. Likewise, the OSCE should also continue to develop the partnerships it has established with other international actors active in the area, such as the Venice Commission, the European Commission against Racism and



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Intolerance (ECRI) and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

10. Finally, the OSCE, and participating States in particular, should make full use of the expertise that has been developed within the organisation. Chief amongst this is the ODIHR Advisory Panel on Freedom of Religion or Belief, established in 1997. This resource has developed greatly over the years and continues to be a valuable tool to enhance religious or belief freedom. It is also a reference point for a larger community of experts and scholars in the OSCE area. In addition ODIHR, together with the panel, has published a series of useful guidelines on freedom of religion or belief. The EU attaches great value to these guidelines and we encourage all participating States to make use of the assistance and recommendations provided by ODIHR and the Advisory Panel.