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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 freedom for all and is highlighted in numerous OSCE commitments. As with other fundamental freedoms, FORB benefits all as it contributes to creating the conditions required for peace, democratisation and development and for the promotion of other human rights. Despite this, over half of the world's population live in countries where the state seriously limits citizens' freedom to believe, learn about belief or manifest belief. This negatively affects all faith communities, including atheists.

*E.g. Uzbekistan: The government exercises total control over the public religious expression of the Muslim majority. Minority communities such as Bahá'ís, Christians, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna followers are subjected amongst other things to torture, arbitrary arrest, prohibition of public or private gatherings for worship, police raids and incitement to hatred on state media.*

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.

*E.g. Kazakhstan: The Internal Policy Department of East Kazakhstan Regional Administration noted "a fall in the level of tolerance towards representatives of other faiths and ethnicities" in the region in August and September 2008. This was the time when politicians and the media were most critical of "dangerous" and "extremist" religious communities and the campaign to adopt harsh legislation restricting freedom of religion or belief was at its height.*

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.

*E.g. Uzbekistan: Despite widespread poverty, government imposed harsh restrictions on freedom of religion or belief limit the ability of faith communities, including the majority Muslim community, to organise to promote social development.*

### **Recommendations**

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:

- Implement their OSCE commitments concerning freedom of religion or belief. The holder of the function of Chairperson-in-Office bears a particular responsibility to take a lead in implementing commitments.
- 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 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”.
- Prioritise the integration freedom of religion or belief in foreign affairs policy and practice.
- 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 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.

*This document is adapted from “Freedom, faith and change – how to integrate freedom of religion or belief in Swedish foreign policy”. The report will be published in English in November on the following website [www.missioncouncil.se](http://www.missioncouncil.se). The Swedish version can be downloaded from*

<http://www.missioncouncil.se/saarbetarvi/paverkanochoptionsbildning/aktuelltomreligionsfrihet/nyrapportbristandereligionfrihetbromsarsverigeiutrikespolitiken.5.7cf9c5aa121e17bab42800014925.html>

### ***The Swedish Mission Council***

*The Swedish Mission Council is a broad ecumenical body of 36 member churches and organisations ranging from Orthodox, Roman Catholic and numerous protestant churches to church based development and mission agencies. Our members have and the organisations they cooperate with internationally 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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