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OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting Warsaw, 21 September – 2 October 2015

EU Statement – Working Session 15

Mr / Madame Moderator,

The EU attaches the greatest importance to the promotion and protection of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief as a human right that must be protected everywhere and for everyone and, thus, has made it one of its priorities under its human rights foreign policy. The EU Foreign Affairs Council adopted specific Guidelines in June 2013 that contain clearly defined priorities and tools for the promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief worldwide.

Our recommendations in relation to this session are the following:

1. Participating States as well as OSCE Institutions and field operations should recognise, in their structures and activity, that violations of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief are violations of the fundamental freedoms of all citizens, regardless of their religious, deeply held ethical, or non-religious beliefs. They should address such human rights violations in a way which does not discriminate against or in favour of any belief and safeguards the right to freedom of expression, which includes the right to publicly criticise religious or other beliefs.
2. Participating States should fulfil their commitments by facilitating groups, associations and communities, existing on the basis of religious or non-religious beliefs to peacefully operate and publicly manifest their beliefs, according to their legal status and respecting their autonomy. They should establish fair and clear standards of recognition which do not infringe OSCE



EUROPEAN UNION

commitments and international human rights standards, as outlined in the OSCE/ODIHR “Guidelines on the legal personality of religious or belief communities” is of utmost importance.

3. We assert that violence against persons, groups or communities in violation of their right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief is unacceptable under any circumstances.
4. We highlight the positive role that free and independent media can have on preventing the increase of bias and prejudice based on religion and in promoting mutual respect and understanding, including through specific educational and awareness-raising programmes.
5. We stress the important role of political leaders, elected and state officials and civil society in denouncing public manifestations of religious intolerance with a loud and clear voice and in a timely manner.
6. We encourage the ODIHR to address the connections between fundamental human rights, especially freedom of religion or belief and tolerance and non-discrimination issues and we recommend that this be reflected to all relevant OSCE events and activities.
7. We support the participating States’ promotion of opportunities for religious and non-religious groups within society to have the possibility of open dialogue with each other and with policy makers on all relevant issues.
8. We acknowledge the crucial role played by the OSCE/ODIHR Advisory Council on Freedom of Religion or Belief, noting particularly its legal assistance to participating States, and call for the Council to be supported and



EUROPEAN UNION

for its activities to be expanded, be made more visible and accessible. We call for resources to be given to enable this to happen.

Mr/Madame Moderator,

Freedom of religion or belief is a human right that has to be applied and protected universally. The EU is of the opinion that freedom of religion or belief is an individual right which can be exercised in community with others. It applies equally to all persons. It is a fundamental freedom that includes all religions or beliefs, including those that have not been traditionally practised in a particular country, the beliefs of persons belonging to religious minorities, as well as non-theistic and atheistic beliefs and also includes the right to change one's religion or belief. It is also an essential pillar of safe and prosperous societies. Its absence breeds distrust and uncertainty, undermines political stability and endangers security.

We express our deep concern that serious instances of discrimination and persecution on the grounds of religion or belief, including acts of violence, intimidation and coercion, continue to occur in parts of the OSCE area. Women and girls in particular often face complex human rights violations based on both their religion or belief and their gender. The EU believes that there is an urgent need for vigilance and action in this regard. The promotion and protection of rights of persons belonging to religious minorities deserve specific attention and need to be addressed in the most efficient and comprehensive manner. We emphasise that the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief may be subject only to limitations necessary in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, or for the protection of the rights and the freedoms of others.

The EU stresses that inter-religious dialogue, education and cooperation are key to fostering a climate of mutual respect, understanding and inclusiveness across our societies. These initiatives must be promoted in a human rights perspective, ensuring



EUROPEAN UNION

respect of freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression and all other human rights and fundamental freedoms. We stress the active role civil society, independent national human rights institutions and a free media can play in this respect. We call on all States, in all circumstances, to put in place conditions for the safeguarding of freedom of religion or belief. In addition, the international community should consolidate its collective response to those who want to use religion as an instrument of division and to fuel extremism and violence.

It is our firm conviction that freedom of religion or belief is intrinsically linked to freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of association and assembly as well as to other human rights and fundamental freedoms all of which contribute towards the building of pluralistic, tolerant, and democratic societies.

We express our full support for the work of the ODIHR and its Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief in assisting participating States to implement relevant OSCE commitments. We also welcome the existing cooperation between the OSCE and the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe and encourage OSCE participating States to extend full cooperation to the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The EU stands ready to continue to further promote constructive cooperation and coordination with these bodies and is committed to maintaining the right to freedom of religion or belief at the core of its human rights agenda.

Thank you.

The Candidate Countries TURKEY, the FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO*, and ALBANIA*, the Country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and Potential Candidate BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA, and the EFTA country NORWAY, member of the European Economic Area, as well as UKRAINE, the REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA, GEORGIA, ANDORRA, and SAN MARINO align themselves with this statement.

* The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.