

## **JOINT STATEMENT ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS**

We make this statement in recognition that tomorrow, immediately following this Ministerial Council, we will observe Human Rights Day, marking the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Instead of celebrating our achievements, we regret the further deterioration in parts of the OSCE region of respect for the exercise and enjoyment of those human rights, including the fundamental freedoms of expression and opinion, of association and peaceful assembly, and of thought, conscience, religion or belief. This is in sharp contrast to the commitments made by all participating States in the Helsinki Final Act and onwards, to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, and promote universal and effective respect for them.

As pointed out in the Declaration adopted by the Parallel Civil Society Conference, the space for civil society is shrinking in our region, with numerous negative implications for the realization of the OSCE comprehensive security concept.

We commend all people and organisations that work tirelessly to ensure that the participating States implement our OSCE commitments on human rights and who hold governments to account. We speak here of civil society organisations, large and small, local, national and international, and also of courageous individuals who step forward to defend human rights.

There is no single model for human rights defenders. Examples include media workers, parliamentarians, lawyers, activists, bloggers and academics, alongside civil society organisations, but this list is not, and can never be, exhaustive. This group of brave individuals deserves our recognition and our deepest respect.

However, in certain parts of the OSCE region we continue to see severe restrictions placed on civil society organisations and attacks on human rights defenders. Legislation that restricts the work of civil society, and which results in criminal charges against and detention of people who have devoted their professional lives to the support of others. Lawyers who act in line with their professional obligations to defend individuals, only to subsequently face criminal charges themselves. Journalists who are silenced, through intimidation, legislation and restrictions on their work, and more worryingly through violent acts and murder.

So it is not enough just to give them our thanks. It is time for us to stand up for their rights.

Where we see that another person's rights are at risk or under attack we must speak out and remind those governments of the commitments that they have freely made.

Whether it is a human rights defender facing reprisals for their actions, or whether it is someone who is being harassed, bullied or ridiculed because of who they are or what they stand for. We must challenge harmful stereotypes, combat myths with facts, and speak up for tolerance and non-discrimination. We must recall our commitments and hold ourselves and each other to account. There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.

We commend the work of the OSCE autonomous institutions, ODIHR, the HCNM and the RFOM, for their efforts to stand up for human rights, thereby contributing to our common security. Their institutional independence is essential to the promotion and protection of fundamental freedoms and human rights. To that end, they need to be equipped with adequate and sufficient means.

We will continue to take forward the principles that underpin both the UDHR, the international covenants and the Helsinki Final Act and stand up for human rights, across the OSCE region, and worldwide.

We also would like to express our sincere appreciation and thanks to the German Chairmanship for its tireless efforts to strengthen the Human Dimension.

### **On behalf of**

Albania, United States of America, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Cyprus, Croatia, Denmark, Spain, Republic of Estonia, Finland, France, Federal Republic of Germany, Georgia, United Kingdom, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, Norway, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Czech Republic, and Ukraine.