



EUROPEAN UNION
OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting
Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association
Vienna, 16-17 April 2015

EU Opening Statement

1. The European Union welcomes the holding of this meeting and commends the Serbian OSCE Chairmanship for dedicating a human dimension event to discussing ongoing challenges to the enjoyment of these freedoms.
2. The EU attaches a high priority to the promotion and protection of the fundamental freedoms of peaceful assembly and association. They are intrinsic to any democratic society and facilitate the enjoyment of other rights including that to freedom of expression. They are also essential prerequisites for the functioning of independent civil society. These freedoms are rights not privileges, and restrictions should be the exception rather than the rule.
3. This SHDM offers a timely opportunity to focus on the positive obligation of states to facilitate the enjoyment of these freedoms and to consider how to overcome any challenges states are facing as they seek to ensure this. The European Union is not immune to such challenges, and we will seek over the course of this meeting to share something of our experiences and lessons learned. This meeting is also a valuable opportunity for dialogue with civil society, particularly to hear their experiences and assessments of the situation within the OSCE with regards to the enjoyment of these freedoms, and we stand ready to engage constructively regarding any ongoing concerns that civil society may identify within the EU.
4. More broadly, civil society's input into the functioning of our democracies and to the work of the OSCE remains vitally important. Their contributions add value and relevance to our work in the OSCE and we wish to express our appreciation that the Civic Solidarity Platform and the International Partnership for Human Rights have circulated a joint paper ahead of this meeting on the situation in several OSCE participating States. We share many of their concerns.
5. Unfortunately, the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association are increasingly being limited and restricted in the OSCE region. The space for civil society in some OSCE participating States is also shrinking and their contribution stifled by repressive legislation, policy and practices. The enactment of laws that restrict access to foreign funding for NGOs and label them as foreign agents is one the most worrying examples of such restrictive measures. The consideration and replication of such legislation in other OSCE participating States is particularly concerning, including in the case of Crimea where this and other restrictive legislation is being imposed as a result of its illegal annexation by the Russian Federation. We have also seen the right to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly undermined in some participating States through excessive and disproportionate use of force in the policing of

demonstrations and through an increasing tendency to introduce legislation and policies that limit the scope for peaceful protest, occasionally leading also to disproportionate and excessive prison terms. Recent OSCE election observation mission reports have also highlighted restrictions to these freedoms in several OSCE participating States, and the consequent impact of such restrictions on the holding of free and fair elections.

6. This SHDM will hopefully take stock of the increasing restrictions experienced by independent civil society, but more importantly consider how this trend can be reversed. We were pleased that our draft proposal for an OSCE Ministerial Council Decision on the Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association presented ahead of the Basel Ministerial Council secured the support of over forty participating States. We hope that the discussion at this SHDM will both reinforce the importance of strengthened OSCE commitments in this area and encourage more participating States to support the initiative.