

**Opening Remarks by
Ambassador Clemens Koja
Chairperson of the Permanent Council**

Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting

**Freedom of Religion or Belief:
Issues, Opportunities, and the specific Challenges of Combating
Anti-Semitism and Intolerance and Discrimination against
Christians, Muslims and Members of other Religions**

**22 - 23 June 2017
Hofburg, Vienna**

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Dear Director Link,
Dear Professor Ventura,
Dear Ambassadors,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to welcome you here today, to this year's first Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting (SHDM), organized together with ODIHR.

Allow me to share with you the Austrian Chairmanship's perspective on the importance of the issues we will be discussing here over the next two days.

Austria has taken over the OSCE Chairmanship at a critical moment. In too many places, we see grave threats to peace and security; including to the detriment of our human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Notably, the right to freedom of religion or belief is increasingly violated, where other human rights are also encroached upon. The level of respect for religious freedom is also a clear indicator for the respect for many other, closely interlinked, human rights: such as freedom of association and assembly, or freedom of expression.

The right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, and fostering mutual respect and understanding are among the original tenets of the OSCE. The 1975 Helsinki Final Act states that *"participating States will respect human rights and*

fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion" and that "respect for (these rights and freedoms) is an essential factor for the peace, justice and well-being necessary to ensure the development of friendly relations and co-operation among (...) all States."

Austria has identified this fundamental right as one of our Chairmanship priorities in the OSCE human dimension for this year, in order to continue efforts in this area, and to highlight the indispensable contribution of the right to freedom of religion or belief as conducive to promoting sustainable stability and security in our societies.

Additionally, all issues related to the broader topic of tolerance and non-discrimination, including based on religion or belief, also belong to the priorities of the Austrian Chairmanship. This includes the challenges of combatting anti-Semitism and intolerance and discrimination against Christians, Muslims, and members of other religions. Among other endeavours, like previous Chairmanships, Austria has appointed three Personal Representatives of the Chairperson-in-Office on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination to foster tolerance and dialogue in support of our Chairmanship agenda. I am glad to welcome that the most recently appointed Prof. Ingeborg Gabriel (Rep. on combating racism, xenophobia, and discrimination, also focusing on intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions) who has joined us at this meeting, and will be speaking at the third session tomorrow which is entirely dedicated to this matter.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Austria is committed to contributing toward helping rebuild trust and confidence between the OSCE participating states as well as citizens' trust in governmental institutions and organisations mandated with safeguarding peace and our shared values.

Building trust requires open and constructive dialogue. Indeed, this includes intra- and interreligious dialogue, as well as the open and transparent dialogue between public authorities and people belonging to religious or belief communities.

We consider dialogue to be the effective instrument to foster respect, cooperation and to lead to a common understanding of these rights and freedoms, in order to strengthening democratic processes and the rule of law. This is an essential part of Austrian foreign policy as well as domestic initiatives. As such, a Task Force on Dialogue of Cultures and Religions was established within the Austrian Foreign Ministry in 2007, charged i.a. with supporting dialogue platforms and interreligious civil society initiatives. This is just one example of various well-established and institutionalised efforts toward interreligious dialogue. We look forward to hearing further positive examples on the crucial role of dialogue and best practice to this end in the fourth session, which is fully dedicated to this matter.

Dear participants,

The aim of this meeting is to provide an opportunity for OSCE participating States, OSCE institutions and executive structures, international organizations, civil society organizations, and religious or belief communities to take stock of our OSCE human dimension commitments in the sphere of freedom of religion or belief and tolerance and non-discrimination, in the wake of current and emerging issues in the region, to clarify and explore the multi-faceted dimensions of this right and its contribution to security, exchange views on good practices, and to offer recommendations.

In addition to the opening and closing sessions, the event will have four working sessions, the topics of which I have just elaborated. I am glad to say that we have a number of remarkable moderators and introducers for these sessions. We also encourage all participants to engage in lively discussions and an open dialogue on the interrelationship between the right to freedom of religion or belief and security, at the backdrop of current and emerging challenges, to share best practices and positive examples in this regard, and to provide concrete recommendations to participating States which we can all learn from and hopefully emulate.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you a fruitful meeting.