

Mr. Chair,

A couple of years ago, the Belgian “Centre d’Action Laïque” which is a member of the European Humanist Federation, addressed a speech at the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, asking several OSCE member states to remove blasphemy crime from their domestic laws. We repeated this call last year and, unfortunately, I am just about to insist again...

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The topic of the session which brings us together today is “freedom of religion or belief”. I hope that – whatever our beliefs are, or are not - we can all agree that Freedom of religion or belief will never be guaranteed if there is no freedom of expression.

Unfortunately, so called “blasphemy” or “religious insult” is still considered as an offence in Austria, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Italy, Ireland, the Netherlands, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Spain, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Russia and Turkey.

Just to give you a few examples, last year, in Greece, a young scientist was arrested and charged for blasphemy just for setting a Facebook page mocking a monk. In the same country, two actors were arrested because they took part in play considered as blasphemous. In Turkey, the famous musician, Fazil Say, was recently sentenced to 10-month of prison because of “insulting religious beliefs held by a section of the society” just because he tweeted a few lines of the poet Omar Khayyam. And I won’t even bother to mention what happened to the “Pussy Riot” in Russia, a story I’m sure you all know as well as I do.

Turkish Prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan once said that “Freedom of thought and belief ends where the freedom of thought and belief of others starts.” Well, actually, it’s not as simple as that.

Let me just remind you that Freedom of expression is protected by all major international human rights instruments. The European Court of Human Rights, for instance, has stressed on many occasions that freedom of expression constitutes “one of the essential foundations of [a democratic] society”, and that “it is applicable also to ideas that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population”.

This is the price of democracy and I hope that we are all ready to pay it. This is why the Belgian Centre d’Action Laïque and the European Humanist Federation expect that the OSCE will urge its state members to remove blasphemy crime from their domestic laws.

And if it does, I promise to come back next year, to raise another issue.

Thank you very much.