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OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting Warsaw, 22 September - 3 October 2014

EU Statement for Working Session 14: Fundamental Freedoms II (Specifically Selected Topic: Freedom of Religion and Belief)

Mr. / Madame Moderator,

The EU attaches the greatest importance to the promotion and protection of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief **as a fundamental human right** and 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, including within the EU.

Freedom of religion or belief is a universal human right that needs to be protected everywhere for everyone. 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**



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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. 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.

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 pluralist, **inclusive**, and democratic societies. **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.

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 in implementing relevant OSCE commitments, including the decision adopted last year at Kyiv Ministerial Council Meeting on freedom of religion or belief. We also welcome the existing cooperation **between** the OSCE **and** the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. 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.



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In conclusion, the EU would like to offer the following recommendations:

-- In promoting freedom of religion or belief, the indivisibility, interdependence and interrelation of human rights and **the** OSCE human dimension commitments should be kept in mind. The implementation of commitments in this area goes hand in hand with respect for other fundamental freedoms and human rights, especially freedom of expression and equality and non-discrimination for all without distinction. If one of them is lacking, the other one cannot be fully achieved and vice versa.

-- Participating States should safeguard the rights of all persons independent of their religion or belief, or the absence thereof, by following a rights-based approach. **This goes beyond promoting tolerance and urges positive measures to create an inclusive pluralistic society. States** should protect all persons - not religions or beliefs in themselves - and also protect the right to express opinions on any or all religions and beliefs. **We** welcome ODIHR's decision to create two posts related to Freedom of Religion or Belief in its Human Rights Department.

-- Participating States should create an environment that enables citizens and groups to challenge prejudices and discrimination against any persons or communities, **whether it be** in **the** minority or **the** majority, on grounds of their religious or non-religious beliefs.

The Candidate Countries the FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO*, SERBIA* 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, ARMENIA, GEORGIA, ANDORRA and SAN MARINO align themselves with this statement.

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