



Session II: Freedom of Peaceful Assembly: new challenges and opportunities for dialogue

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Ahead of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, there were concerns that those who wanted to protest against the Chinese government would be denied their freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. The government's solution was to create so-called "protest pens":

- The pens were hidden far away from the Olympics and protestors wishing to use them needed to apply for a permit with the Beijing Public Security Bureau five days before their intended protest.
- The application form required information on the time and purpose of the protest, and the precise slogans that would appear on any banners or posters used.
- Of course, applications could easily be rejected by the Bureau: As the Beijing Olympic Organising Committee website explained, *"Assembling to march and protest is a citizen's right. But it must be stressed that citizens must not harm national, social and collective interests."*

I mention this story because in Europe there is a real concern that the fundamental right to freedom of assembly could be reduced in a similar manner, and the only freedom that will remain will be within specially cordoned off areas, or so-called "protest pens."

In other words, "you can have your freedom of assembly, just not *here*, in public."

Let me give one example from the supposedly tolerant West.

In May of this year, after the British government announced plans to re-define marriage, a London-based Christian organization sought to hold a conference on the subject of traditional marriage at the Law Society in London. It was entitled: *"One Man, One Woman - Making the case for marriage, for the good of society."* After months of planning, the Law Society cancelled the conference, stating that it was, *"contrary to our diversity policy, espousing as it does an ethos which is opposed to same-sex marriage"*.

The conference was then moved to a government building, and the night before the conference was due to begin, this second venue cancelled the conference, again stating that it was *"inappropriate"* and against *"diversity"*.

If citizens cannot assemble together to discuss the current state of the law at the *Law Society* or a *government building*, then freedom of assembly is little more than a dead letter.

Participating OSCE states must ensure that freedom of assembly includes the freedom to speak on issues, in public, that the government or others may find disagreeable. We surely do not want to live in a society where the government decrees that: "Assembling to march and protest is a citizen's right. But not when such assembly is on controversial issues or is against the government's current policies."