



EUROPEAN UNION

**OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2013
Warsaw, 26 September 2013**

EU statement – Working Session 7 FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF (CONTINUED)

Madame Moderator,

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, tolerant, and democratic societies. Expression of a religious or non-religious belief, or of an opinion concerning a religion or belief, is also protected by the right to freedom of opinion and expression enshrined in Article 19 of the ICCPR. At the same time the international community needs to consolidate its collective response to those who want to use religion as an instrument of division, fueling extremism and violence. Religion may never be used to justify or condone the restriction or violation of human rights, including the rights of women.

Notwithstanding the remaining challenges, the EU commends advances made in protecting and implementing the freedom of religion or belief over the past years. In this regard, we express our warm support for the work of the ODIHR in assisting

participating States in implementing OSCE commitments related to Freedom of Religion or Belief and the fight against related discrimination and we welcome the recent establishment of its new Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief. We also welcome the existing cooperation of the OSCE with the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. The EU stands ready to continue and further promote constructive cooperation and coordination with these bodies and is committed to keep freedom of religion or belief at the core of its human rights agenda. In this respect, we fully support the intention of the Ukrainian OSCE Chairmanship to forward for adoption at the forthcoming Kyiv Ministerial Council Meeting a comprehensive freedom of religion or belief Decision.

In conclusion, the EU would like to offer the following recommendations, bearing in mind the specific points made during today's working sessions:

-- In promoting freedom of religion or belief, the indivisibility, interdependence and interrelation of human rights and 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. They should protect all persons - not religions or beliefs in themselves - and protect also the right to express opinions on any or all religions and beliefs.

-- Participating States should guarantee the right to freedom of expression and opinion of individuals on any or all religions and beliefs and create an environment that enables citizens and groups to challenge prejudices and discrimination against any persons or communities, be it minority or majority, because of their religious or non-religious beliefs.

-- Participating States should explore ways to update and reinforce existing OSCE commitments in Freedom of Religion or Belief.

-- ODIHR and OSCE Field Operations should develop and carry out activities aimed at enhancing understanding and strengthening the implementation of freedom of religion or belief.

-- ODIHR should reinforce the work of its Desk on Freedom of Religion or Belief and effectively address the connections of Freedom of Religion or Belief with other fundamental freedoms in cooperation with its Human Rights Department.

The Candidate Countries the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, Montenegro*, Iceland+ and Serbia*, the Countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidates Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the EFTA countries Liechtenstein and Norway, members of the European Economic Area, as well as the Republic of Moldova, Armenia, Andorra and San Marino, align themselves with this statement.

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

+ Iceland continues to be a member of the EFTA and of the European Economic Area.