



OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2018

Working Session 10 – Statement by the Delegation of Canada, delivered by Counsellor Daniel Barbarie, Monday, September 17, 2018

Moderator,

We would like to put forward the following two recommendations for this session:

- 1) That participating States fully respect their OSCE commitments and international obligations with regards to the rights to freedoms of association and peaceful assembly, as well as freedom of expression, in both physical and digital contexts.
- 2) That OSCE participating States ensure that laws, regulations, and practices do not unduly restrict the composition and activities of civil society, and that they promote and enable an active and effective participation of civil society in multilateral forums, such as HDIM.

Moderator,

Canada believes that freedom of opinion and expression is a cornerstone of safe and prosperous societies, essential to the realization of democracy. We also believe that the right to express oneself freely is the same in physical and digital contexts.

Freedoms of association and of peaceful assembly are also foundational rights in a free and democratic society. In Canada, public demonstrations are recognized and accepted as part of democratic life. Police are trained to understand that individuals have a right to peacefully and lawfully assemble, and to respond with appropriate de-escalatory measures should a demonstration become violent. Our laws protect our citizens' rights to assemble peacefully and express their opinions, and Canadian courts ensure accountability for any arbitrary or otherwise unconstitutional restrictions on these rights.

One of the most demonstrable indicators of a society with true freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and association is the vibrancy of its civil society and its civic spaces. Civil society is a vehicle for advocacy and civic participation in the development and implementation of government policies and programs. It plays a key part in holding governments to account. By enabling civil society, participating States can foster inclusive and democratic societies, in which unhindered civic space allows the exercise of one's freedom of opinion, expression, association, and peaceful assembly, including in digital contexts.

We are deeply concerned that through new legislation and increasingly harsh tactics, certain governments and other actors in the OSCE region are further reducing the space for civil society, discriminating against individuals belonging to vulnerable and marginalized groups, and threatening human rights defenders and other civil society actors. The measures being implemented include punitive restrictions on freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and expression and opinion. There are also increased restrictions on free expression in digital contexts, resulting from measures taken by some participating States to unduly restrict the use of digital technologies. Furthermore, along with domestic reprisals against civil society, we have witnessed a growing number of OSCE governments who wish to limit civil society participation in international fora like this very meeting.

I would conclude by reiterating Canada's firm position that civil society has an integral role to play at HDIM and within the OSCE region, and that we must continue to defend this role.