



OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2008

Working sessions 12 and 13: Freedom of religion or belief
(7th October 2008)

EU Statement

The European Union firmly believes in the promotion and protection of the freedom of religion or belief, including the promotion of tolerance in matters relating to religion or belief. These are rights and concepts on which the EU was founded and to which all EU member States are steadfastly committed. Religion or belief, for those who profess either, is one of the fundamental elements in their conception of life and should be fully respected and guaranteed.

Unfortunately, violations of this freedom continue to occur within the OSCE region. A persistent problem is the misuse of registration procedures and the resort to discriminatory registration procedures as a means to limit the right to freedom of religion or belief of members of certain religious communities. States cannot impose or interpret limitations in a way that would jeopardise the essence of the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief. Such limitations have to be prescribed by law, may not be arbitrary or unreasonable, nor discriminate on the basis of religion or belief. They must pursue a legitimate aim and be proportionate to that aim, in accordance with international human rights law.

The EU is seriously concerned by the misconception of some countries regarding the supposedly dangerous nature of some religious and belief communities. This misconception may vitiate the right to freedom of religion or belief and may lead to intolerance and violence directed against members of those communities. States should ensure that their constitutional and legislative systems provide adequate and effective guarantees of the freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief to all without distinction.

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Against this background, the EU is pleased to see that this year the OSCE is devoting a full day to freedom of religion or belief. We look forward to frank discussions on the implementation of this freedom in the OSCE region. In all OSCE countries there are challenges that need discussing. For example, we need to address the rise of religious extremism affecting the rights of individuals and groups based on religion or belief, the situations of violence and discrimination that affect many women as well as individuals from other vulnerable groups in the name of religion or belief or due to cultural and traditional practices, and the abuse of religion or belief for ends inconsistent with international human rights law.

The freedom of religion or belief is also at the heart of the Council of Europe. The EU welcomes the existing cooperation between the OSCE and the Council of Europe, and encourages both organisations to enhance their cooperation in this field.

Finally, the EU is sincerely committed to the promotion of tolerance. This year is the European year of intercultural dialogue and throughout the EU activities are undertaken to bring people closer together. For example, in the Netherlands a meeting of world religious leaders will be held on 10 December to express support of the main world religions for the protection and promotion of human rights.

By facilitating intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, we can establish a situation of mutual respect and understanding, which is the cornerstone of the Human Dimension of the OSCE. Thus, respect for the freedom of religion or belief is instrumental in creating a safe and human environment for all in the OSCE region.

Finally, the EU commends ODIHR and its Panel of experts on freedom of religion or belief for their continuing work in this area. The Toledo Principles on Religious Education are just one example of the high quality of this work. The EU is therefore pleased to hear that the Panel of experts will meet tomorrow to discuss its future activities and it wishes ODIHR and the Panel every success with their future activities.

The candidate countries Turkey, Croatia* and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, the countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidate countries Albania and Serbia, the European Free Trade Association country and member of the European Economic Area Norway, as well as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Armenia align themselves with this statement.

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*Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process

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