

**EUROPEAN UNION****OSCE Permanent Council Nr 1042
Vienna, 5 March 2015**

**EU statement on ODIHR/VENICE Commission Guidelines
on Freedom of Association**

The European Union would like to draw attention to the launch in Geneva today of the guidelines on Freedom of Association developed jointly by ODIHR and the Venice Commission. We pay tribute to the excellent work done by the group of experts that prepared the guidelines.

We very much welcome these guidelines and see them as an important and timely contribution in a context where international standards and commitments in relation to freedom of association are increasingly being undermined.

The right to the Freedom of Association is an essential prerequisite to any democratic society and facilitates the fulfilment of many other rights including freedom of expression. But there has been a disturbing trend in some OSCE participating States that has seen the space for independent civil society restricted by legislation and policies that impede and control the enjoyment of freedom of association. The consideration and enactment of laws that restrict access to foreign funding for NGOs and label them as foreign agents is one the most worrying examples of such restrictive measures.

We therefore welcome the inclusion in the joint guidelines of a set of guiding principles and note that they recall important obligations including states' duty to not only protect, but also to facilitate the exercise of freedom of association. The guiding principles also highlight the importance of associations being free to seek, receive and use resources.

Mr Chairman,

The European Union recognises that the joint guidelines are neither legally binding nor negotiated by consensus. They are however rooted in OSCE commitments and international law and standards. It is in that spirit that we encourage all participating States to welcome such documents as a source of reference, guidance and practical advice to aid the implementation of our common commitments.

In conclusion, we recall the draft Ministerial Council Decision on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and the Freedom of Association in the OSCE Area that we tabled prior to the Basel Ministerial Council meeting. We were pleased that the draft received the co-sponsorship of over 40 participating States and will continue to promote the adoption of a decision on this topic. These joint guidelines are an important addition to our draft initiative. We look forward to further discussing these issues at the first Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting next month.

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

* The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania 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.