

OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2005

30 September 2005

Report by Jenoff Van Hulle

In 2005, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) celebrated the 30th anniversary of its basic treaty, the Helsinki Final Declaration. The OSCE was created as a security organization. The situation at the time explains the considerations of its founding fathers. The Cold War and the Cuban missile crisis had brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. Although the two superpowers had managed to step back from the edge of catastrophe, the stakes were too high to risk a repeat, and the idea of *détente* – the gradual easing of tensions between East and West – soon gained ground.

Human rights

However, the OSCE does not deal exclusively with issues of military security, disarmament or border issues. Based on a broad concept of security, it deals equally with human rights. The OSCE considers security more than merely the absence of war. Instead, it was the intention of the OSCE participating States to create a comprehensive framework for peace and stability in Europe.

The Helsinki Final Act acknowledges as one of its ten guiding principles “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscious, religion or belief”. This constitutes a milestone in the history of human rights protection. For the first time, human rights principles were included as an explicit and integral element of a regional security framework on the same basis as politico-military and economic issues. This acknowledgement has been reinforced by numerous follow-up documents. It is therefore now well established and beyond question. There is no hierarchy among these principles, and no government can claim they have to establish political or economic security before addressing human rights and democracy. It is the OSCE view that a free society allowing everyone to fully participate in public life is a safeguard against conflict and instability.

Human dimension

In OSCE terminology, the term human dimension is used to describe the set of norms and activities related to human rights and democracy that are regarded within the OSCE as one of three dimensions of security, together with the politico-military and the economic and environmental dimensions. The term also indicates that the OSCE norms in this field cover a wider area than traditional human rights law.

To assist participating states with the implementation of human dimension commitments, the OSCE has established a number of permanent institutions. One of

them, the most important, is the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in Warsaw. The 1992 Helsinki Document sets out the ODIHR mandate to help OSCE participating States “ensure full respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, to abide by the rule of law, to promote principles of democracy and ... to build, strengthen and protect democratic institutions, as well as to promote tolerance throughout society”.

In order to structure its human dimension activities, it organizes regular meetings that take stock of OSCE human dimension commitments and recommends follow-up.

The EHF delegation at the 2005 HDIM

The 2005 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting took place in Warsaw from 19th to 30th September. A full delegation of humanists was present:

- Suzy Mommaerts (Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen, Belgium and Treasurer of the European Humanist Federation)
- Vera Pegna (Unione degli Atei ei Agnostici Razionalisti, Italy and Vice-President of the European Humanist Federation)
- Julien Houben (Unione degli Atei ei Agnostici Razionalisti, Italy)
- Adam Cioch (Fakty i Mity, Poland)
- Jenoff Van Hulle (International Relations Officer of the European Humanist Federation).

Their mission was to speak with representatives of ODIHR about a resolution, adopted in 1989 at the conference of Vienna by the participating States of the OSCE. The resolution states that States should take effective measures to guarantee the individual freedom of religion and remove all forms of discrimination between believers and non-believers.

To put emphasis on this, the European Humanist Federation organized a side-event on The Status of Non-Believers in Europe on 28th September. This was sponsored jointly with the Centre d'Action La que (Belgium), Prometheus Society (Slovakia), Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen (Belgium), and Unione degli Atei e degli Agnostici Razionalisti (Italy). It was announced as follows:

The Status of Non-believers in Europe

Except for a couple of countries that give official recognition to non confessional philosophical organizations, in Europe there is no such thing as a status for non believers. This term is used to lump together a heterogeneous lot: atheists, i.e. people who have chosen a non confessional philosophical stance; agnostics who choose deliberately not to choose one; freethinkers, who want to be free to choose a non-dogmatic vision and, last but not least since they are the vast majority, people who just do not care about religion. Altogether these citizens constitute between 35 and 50% of the European population. However, it must be pointed out that no reliable statistics exist for non-believers or for believers, given the widely different criteria

used to define each of these groups, e.g. according to Italian statistics 98% of the population is Roman Catholic meaning those on whom baptism has been imposed at birth although most people cheerfully ignore church precepts in their life style. Secularist and humanist citizens have no official status in Europe and do not seek to have one. Were they to have such a status their state would not be more secular, as hundreds of thousands or more citizens who belong to religions different from the established one would go on being discriminated. The only guarantee of effective non-discrimination is a totally secular state which abides by the rule of law.

After an introduction by Vera Pegna, Suzy Mommaerts talked about the “Diversity in Europe Today”. The side-event finished with an intervention by Jenoff van Hulle on “The Freedom and Limits of Thought and Religion” – *links below*. In addition, the European Humanist Federation took the floor in the plenary meetings. Humanist representatives drew attention to discrimination against non-believers in general (Vera Pegna – *links below*) and in the Polish media in particular (Adam Cioch).

Some ODIHR officials warmly welcomed the participation of the European Humanist Federation.

The 2005 HDIM was quite a success for the European Humanist Federation delegation as it has clearly set humanism on the agenda of the OSCE.

[Vera Pegna first plenary intervention](#)

[Vera Pegna second plenary intervention](#)

Side meeting:

[Vera Pegna: The Status of Non-Believers in Europe](#)

[Suzy Mommaerts: Diversity in Europe Today](#)

[Jenoff Van Hulle: The Limits of Freedom of Thought and Religion](#)