

Mr. /Mrs. Chair,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Belgian “Centre d’Action Laïque”, a member of the European Humanist Federation (EHF) I wish to address this statement to the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

In 2004, the ODIHR published a significant document from its Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief: the “Guidelines for Review of Legislation Pertaining to Religion or Belief”. The document was designed to provide an overview and suggestions for legislators and others involved in the review of laws.

Three years ago the Advisory Panel of Experts began a review of the Guidelines. Their draft was effectively finished by about 18 months ago but it has never been published. It seems to have been suppressed and ignored. Now we hear that the panel itself is being disbanded and that a new one is to be created.

The European Humanist Federation (EHF) made a significant input to the revision process of the Guidelines. So you can understand that we have a strong interest in the question.

For instance, the 2004 Guidelines’ document stated that, I quote, “It is very common for legislation not to protect adequately (or not to refer at all to) rights of non-believers. Although not all beliefs are entitled to equal protection, legislation should be reviewed for discrimination against non-believers”.

In the light of this opinion, the European Humanist Federation recommended that the revised guidelines should always refer to ‘religion or belief’ rather than just religion, and more importantly that they should recognise that legislation should take account of the interests of third parties, not just of religions and the state. We pointed out: “that freedom to manifest religion or belief can clash with other rights and that in practice compromises may be necessary: freedom of religion or belief does not always trump other human rights.

Again, mindful of the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion – protected by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and of the OSCE’s ‘Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools’, produced by the same Advisory Panel, we remarked that nonetheless non-religious life stances continued to be marginalised in the curricula of most public schools in contrast with religious life stances. So we recommended that public schools which include religion in their curricula should also teach about non-religious life stances.

The existing Guidelines are exceedingly valuable, and there is every reason to think that the revised Guidelines would be even better. Yet they have been lost, and their authors, the eminent expert members of the Advisory Panel, have been peremptorily dismissed. The European Humanist Federation and its Belgian member organisation, le Centre d’Action Laïque, want to know why. Why is the OSCE scrapping this valuable work in progress? Why is the OSCE treating its eminent expert advisors so disgracefully?

We believe that the Advisory Panel spent time and brought great expertise to the task of revising the Guidelines and that their work ought to be published and not abandoned. Can we have some answers?