



EUROPEAN UNION  
Delegation to the Council of Europe

**1237<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Committee of Ministers**

**Thematic debate: "Freedom of Assembly and Association - current challenges and the response from the Council of Europe"**

**Strasbourg, 6 October 2015**

**EU Statement**

**The universal rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association are fundamental and essential. They constitute the backbone to the effective enjoyment of other human rights**, such as freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of thought, and the preconditions for effective right to free and fair elections. They also guarantee democratic participation in public life. Human rights guarantee not just a life, but a dignified life for human beings.

Unfortunately, disturbing, negative developments that limit the right to peaceful assembly and association have taken place in several countries in the past years. Restrictive legislation has been adopted governing the activities of civil society organisations, registration procedures for NGOs, and their access to foreign and domestic funding. Similarly restrictive measures have been introduced concerning the organisation of public demonstrations. Peaceful rallies have been violently broken up. **Human Rights Defenders have been subjected to harassment, intimidation, arbitrary arrests and violent attacks, and excessive, punitive fines have been imposed on independent journalists and publications.**

**We are in a regrettable situation where instead of defending human rights, we have to defend the human rights defenders from persecution, harassment, attacks and reprisals.**

Journalists, lawyers, defenders of women's rights, child rights, LGTBI and labor rights, and those who demand for free and fair elections are under constant risk of threat and pressure.

The Council of Europe's Secretary General's report "State of Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law in Europe" asserts that freedoms of assembly and association are under greater and wider threats than previously understood.

The Council of Europe is a unique space for dialogue among the member states. The results of our dialogues should not just maintain but improve human rights in the member states.

The European Union is determined to continue and intensify co-operation with the Council of Europe with a view to addressing the challenge of safeguarding the practice of freedoms of assembly and association. Already in 2013 the European Union declared that freedoms of assembly and association are crucial to developing pluralistic, tolerant and democratic societies. As pressure on CSOs and HRDs increases, the EU is intensifying its efforts to

protect them. The new EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, adopted by Foreign Ministers in July, includes a strong focus on protecting civil society space and Human Rights Defenders. The European Union Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) upholds the respect of the fundamental freedoms such as assembly and association in non-EU countries by funding civil society organizations and projects, the budget for which has been increased by 50% for the period 2014-2020.

The Council of Europe is an organization whose core values are human rights, rule of law and democracy. The EU shares these core values. Therefore, **we have the responsibility to show visible support to those who are standing up for human rights and for those who face persecution because of their human rights work. And this has to be done clearly and loudly.**