



Didier Burkhalter (r), OSCE-Chairperson-in-Office and Swiss Foreign Minister, alongside Janez Lenarčič, Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, at a conference on human rights defenders, Bern, 10 June 2014. (FDFA)

PRESS RELEASE

## Political will the key to ensuring the protection of human rights defenders, say participants at OSCE conference in Bern

BERN, 10 June 2014 – Political will on the part of states and genuine partnership with civil society are necessary to ensure that human rights defenders can effectively play their vital role in ensuring and promoting respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law in the OSCE area, said participants at an OSCE conference in Bern today.

The two-day conference “The OSCE and Human Rights Defenders: The Budapest Document 20 Years On,” organized jointly by the Swiss OSCE Chairmanship and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), with the support of the incoming Serbian Chairmanship, brings together national human rights experts, human rights defenders and civil society representatives from across the OSCE region.

Opening the conference, the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office and Swiss Foreign Minister Didier Burkhalter, stressed the role of political will in supporting the work of human rights defenders.

“The implementation of human rights norms first and foremost needs one thing: political will ... Allowing the voices of human rights defenders and civil society to be heard – even when these are uncomfortable voices – is at the basis of a well-functioning democracy,” Burkhalter said. “These men and women working to increase awareness and respect for human rights often take high risks to help their fellow citizens be able to live their lives in dignity. They need and deserve our support.”

Ivan Mrkić, advisor to the current President of Serbia and former Foreign Minister, highlighted the role of the OSCE in supporting participating States in supporting the defence of human rights.

“The prevention of tensions and turbulence caused by violations of all sorts of human rights is the first step to achieving peace and security for everybody in the OSCE area,” Mrkić said. “Our organization is well suited to achieving this goal and has appropriate tools for doing so. For example, it can assist in the adoption of sound non-discriminatory legislation and the establishment of fully democratic national institutions, as well as to monitor and report on their proper functioning.”

In his keynote address, Stavros Lambrinidis, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, told participants that human rights have never been a battle between different cultures, but within them. He added that human rights have always been the universal language of the powerless against the relativism of the powerful.

“Freedom of expression makes sense when we disagree, and especially when we strongly disagree,” Lambrinidis said. “Governments don't have the obligation to agree with civil society; they have clear obligations, including providing human rights defenders with a safe and enabling environment. Strong confident countries speak to human rights defenders.”

The first day of the conference saw the launch of the ODIHR [Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders](#), a publication designed to assist OSCE participating States in promoting security for human rights defenders, in light of the increasing risks they face in carrying out their work.

Ambassador Janez Lenarčič, Director of ODIHR, stressed that the approach presented in the

*Guidelines* to ensuring such protection has to be based on co-operation.

“The Guidelines will only prove as effective as their implementation will be,” Lenarčič said. “I believe the key to success is precisely that genuine partnership that the Budapest Document spoke of 20 years ago. It has to include all those involved in efforts to protect human rights defenders – from States and civil society to regional and international governmental organizations. This remains as important today as it was two decades ago.”

In the 1994 OSCE Budapest Document, “Towards a Genuine Partnership in a New Era”, the participating States confirmed that respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law is an essential component of security and co-operation in the region, and that civil society organizations and free media play a vital role in this regard. In confirming this, they emphasized the need for protection of human rights defenders.

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