WRITTEN STATEMENT

by

Homosexuelle Initiative (HOSI) Wien

to the

OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting

on

Freedom of religion or belief: issues, opportunities, and the specific challenges of combatting anti-semitism and intolerance and discrimination against Christians, Muslims, and members of other religions

(Vienna, 22-23 June 2017)

We would like to reiterate one very specific issue and aspect that often is totally ignored in this debate: the intolerance and discrimination exercised by religious groups in the name of a religion against other groups in society, such as women, gay men, lesbians, transgender people ("LGBT"), or non-believers (atheists) for that matter. All "big" monotheist religions have a long record of oppression, violence and human rights violations against these and other groups. And this violence is not only a historical phenomenon but also happening today. In very recent years, for example, we have seen religious leaders in countries such as Bulgaria, Latvia, Poland, Russia, and Serbia inciting hatred and even violence against LGBT people and pride parades, resulting in a religious mob attacking such parades. In most countries in the OSCE region, people and civil society constantly have to fight against the influence which representatives of the dominating churches exert on secular politics regarding issues such as abortion, civil same-sex marriage or simply non-discrimination and equality for women and LGBT people. The LGBT movement throughout its history basically had to combat prejudice and discrimination that religion had been implanting in society for centuries.

Freedom of religion/belief indeed is a human right, but so is the right to freedom from religion, which had been made clear already in the early days of the OSCE process. The human right to freedom of religion, moreover, is just one of various fundamental rights, and

definitely does not stand above all the other human rights, such as the right to freedom of expression. These human rights may be in conflict with each other, but we have to strongly oppose the idea that religions, church institutions and religious personnel are "sacrosanct", and we have to counter any attempt to criminalise criticism of religion, its often quite irrational dogmas, and religious leaders, which often use the killer argument islamophobia and christianophobia when it's about denouncing the abuses and malpractices done in the name of religion; the same applies to anti-semitism: not every criticism of Israel falls into this category. And believers have to accept that in a modern society even gods and goddesses can be the object of jokes and cartoons. Religious leaders who demand from the state that other people's fundamental rights be limited, are certainly not credible in their demand that their right to freedom of religion be protected.

Recommendations to Member States:

–   Member States should repress any attempts of religious groups or any religion to interfere in secular politics; if churches pursue a political agenda and consider religion as a political ideology, they should organise as a political party;
–   Member States should stop giving special protection to churches which would infringe on the fundamental rights of others. Thus, all laws on blasphemy must be repealed;
–   Member States should be neutral in religious issues and not allow certain churches to usurp the moral hegemony in society, defining ethic values for everyone; thus, Member States should also stop the religious indoctrination of young children as early as in the kindergarten and school by compulsory religious instruction and replace it by neutral and general ethics education;
–   Member States must protect the right of atheists to freedom from religion;
–   Member States must overcome and avoid the insane equation "one country (one government) – one church – one people", which we often find in the orthodox world, as this fosters nationalistic tendencies and excludes all people who do not share this specific faith.