

**Statement at the OSCE HDIM by the Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights, Working Session 2, Fundamental freedoms I, including the role of civil society in the protection of human rights, 12 September 2017 (statement presented by Yuri Dzhibladze)**

Civil society groups working in post-Soviet region and facing pressure and persecution are thankful to many NGO colleagues around the world and governments of democratic countries for solidarity and support, including here at this session. Speaking strongly against shrinking space, exposing cases of harassment, naming and shaming the culprits, making protection of civil society an important part of your foreign policy, adopting resolutions and statements at the international level, giving civil society space at intergovernmental organisations and meetings, providing political, moral, financial and other support to NGOs and activists, giving them recognition in the form of awards, providing temporary shelter or asylum in the case of high risk are all important ways of expressing solidarity and support.

One of the best ways to support civil society groups is cooperating closely with them on the issues they address, using their data and reports, and taking their recommendations seriously for developing policies and strategies to protect and develop human rights and democracy, making their voices and positions heard at the high level of governments and inter-governmental organisations.

One example of such cooperation is the work of the international human rights campaign called “Prove They Are Alive!” which I have the honour to represent. The campaign has been working since 2013 to halt the practice of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan’s prisons and involves members from human rights groups from Russia, the US, Norway, international NGOs, and activists from Turkmenistan who act at a high risk. The campaign acts with support of the OSCE-wide NGO coalition, the international Civic Solidarity Platform, and actively interacts with many governments and intergovernmental organisations, including the OSCE, the United Nations, and the EU. We thank many of you for your continued support throughout these years.

However, we need your support now more than ever. In spite of sustained pressure from the international community, the Turkmen authorities have avoided taking any real steps to end this gross violation of human rights and have not implemented relevant decisions by inter-governmental bodies. Instead, they simulate an ineffective “dialogue” with international organisations on this issue. Since the last HDIM, when the Turkmen delegation was present and briefly addressed this issue, the situation has deteriorated further.

Firstly, responses from Turkmenistan to inquiries on the problem of enforced disappearances have become increasingly empty and often are simply absent – including to the UN Committee against Torture and the UN Human Rights Committee during reviews of its periodic reports and to the EU in the framework of the annual Human Rights Dialogues. In March 2017, the International Committee of Red Cross withdrew from negotiations on cooperation with Turkmenistan, citing unwillingness of the authorities to accept standard ICRC requirements for prison visits. Neither have the Turkmen authorities reacted to strong concern by OSCE participating States expressed in statements at the Permanent Council or through embassies in Ashgabat.

Moreover, since 2016, the government started a new wave of enforced disappearances, with dozens of new victims subjected to full isolation in direct violation of the country's obligations under international and domestic law. Thus, enforced disappearances cannot be seen anymore as only a matter of the past that could be blamed on the previous president; they are widely practiced by the current leadership. Finally, lately there has been a growing number of deaths of people held incommunicado in prisons since 2002-2003: they are just not able to survive after many years of isolation in harsh conditions of Turkmen

prisons. At least five people from among 112 victims of enforced disappearances whose cases have been documented by the campaign died during the last 18 months, bringing the total verified number of deaths to at least 23.

Evidence of continued and growing enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan 15 years after the beginning of this illegal practice and the obvious ineffectiveness of existing dialogues with the Turkmen authorities on this subject are a serious challenge to the international community, including the OSCE. It is clear that when no strong leverage is applied, the Turkmen authorities avoid real cooperation on this urgent matter. OSCE participating States and institutions should recognize that the approach they have been using is not sufficient and adopt a new strategy, using more resolute and proactive means.

To discuss this, we invite you to our side event tonight at 6:15 pm in room 2, where relatives of the disappeared in the “old” and “new” waves of repressions will give testimony of their ordeal, and members of the Prove They Are Alive! campaign will present ideas for possible new strategies for the OSCE and the international community. We need your support in discussing, developing and implementing new strategies.