

## OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

### Oral statement on Fundamental Freedoms in Central Asia (Working Session 10/ 11, 17 September 2018)

I speak for Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, Legal Prosperity Foundation, Association for Human Rights in Central Asia, Restoration of Justice, Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and International Partnership for Human Rights.

Fundamental freedoms are under attack worldwide and Central Asia is no exception. Civil society space is shrinking as governments impose far-reaching restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. Independent media outlets face pressure and journalists, social media users, civil society activists and those who criticise the authorities, are detained, prosecuted and imprisoned on trumped up charges.

In **Kyrgyzstan**, it is too early to tell if steps taken by President Jeenbekov since October 2017 form a sustainable trend. Although compensation claims in punitive libel lawsuits against journalists were dropped, legislation needs amending to ensure that such cases will not happen again. Human rights activist **Azimzhan Askarov** remains behind bars despite the UN Human Rights Committee calling for his release.

In **Kazakhstan**, critical independent media outlets are being banned – such as **Ratel.kz**. Freedom of association is limited arbitrarily, for example, in relation to the banned opposition movement Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan. Although government critics Nurbek Kushakbaev, Amin Eleusinov and **Vadim Kuramshin** were released on parole, human rights activist Maks Bokaev and poet and activist **Aron Atabek**, remain incarcerated.

In **Tajikistan** the conditional release of journalist **Khayrullo Mirsaidov** provided a ray of hope but the authorities continue to increase pressure on critical voices, as well as journalists and independent lawyers like **Burzurgmehr Yurov**. NGOs are subjected to excessive state oversight, checks and harassment.

In **Turkmenistan** fundamental freedoms are seriously curtailed and criticism of state policies is repressed. Journalist **Saparmed Nepeskuliev** was released from prison, but only after completing his three-year sentence on politically motivated charges.

**Uzbekistan's** President Mirziyoyev has taken important steps to break with the repressive practice of his predecessor, but has yet to initiate systematic human rights reform to allow civil society to flourish. Worryingly, since 24 August, at least a dozen active social media users have been arbitrarily detained.

**We urge Central Asian governments to create a safe space for critical and constructive dialogue with civil society actors.**