



OSCE/ODIHR HDIM, Freedom of Movement,
29 September 2011, Lene Wetteland, NHC

Freedom of Movement for all

Mr/Mdm Moderator, Ambassadors, Ladies and Gentlemen

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee is grateful for this opportunity to address the situation on Freedom of Movement in OSCE participating States, and I hope you allow me to let out some steam and end with a friendly advice.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee has been working with development of civil society in Central Asia, Caucasus and the Balkans for several years. One of the important things we do, is to organize meetings for activists where they can exchange experience, strategize and meet similar minded. Also, we facilitate meetings with important decision makers out of the region, so that the activists can share their first hand knowledge with them and influence political decisions.

An increasing challenge for our work is not the repressive countries where our partners work and live and we are not allowed in, but the European countries to where our partners struggle with restrictive visa procedures and rejections in order to limit immigration.

Our partners are brave human rights defenders, who often to great risk for themselves and their family members continue pressing for better human rights situation in their respective countries or in the region. Some of them are so outspoken and effective that the governments see them as a direct threat, and do what they can to pacify the activists. Activists are put on black lists so they cannot leave the country, they do not get exit visas, there are threats against family members or they are framed and put in prison for the period of a planned journey or event or longer periods.

The activists love their country and are willing to put a lot on the line to improve the situation for themselves and their common citizens. They go abroad not in search of a better life there, but in their home country. They know that every time they go abroad this is registered by someone, and someone is paying attention to what they are saying, even filming them, not to take it into consideration, but to record it for later use against them. They know that while they are away, their family can be subject to harassment. They know that when they go abroad, someone can use it against them, blaming them for being agents for foreign states and receiving large amounts of money from them, and disgrace them in the home country.

When all this is taken into consideration, and the activist still think it's worth it to go abroad on our invitation and encouragement, they are frequently met with impolite treatment by the embassies in the given country, large fees, long travel and extensive waiting time. And after all that, they might be rejected a visa because the state thinks that they will not return to their country of origin. Or, a person who has worked hard for improving the court system in his or her country, has been framed,

sentenced in a trial not in accordance with international standards, served a sentence in a prison far from acceptable standards, and is then released on hard conditions, is rejected a visa due to previous convictions.

Think about it for a second: when a state **based** on the rule of law, with referral to your previous conviction in a state **despising** rule of law rejects your visa, or a state where trade unions are respected declines your visa because of your low income in your home country where nobody wants to hire you because you stand up for your rights, I think you can imagine the contradicting feelings the activists struggle with, and the helplessness and embarrassment we as facilitators meet.

Let me finish with a friendly advice to the western countries:

- If your aim is to reduce the number of asylum seekers, it would be most effective to grant visas to the brave people trying to improve the situation in their countries, listen to their advise, and based on this carry out effective policies towards their repressive countries that will improve the overall situation.
- If your aim is to contribute to democratization and security in the OSCE area, the same applies.

Thank you.