

**Oral statement – Human Rights Watch
Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
17 September 2018 – Fundamental Freedoms I**

Human Rights Watch is concerned that a number of OSCE participating states have adopted legislation that limit access to funding or criminalize activities of non-governmental organizations.

In **Hungary** in June this year, the Parliament passed a law that criminalizes a wide range of legitimate activities. Legal professionals and aid workers will now take personal risks if they attempt to carry on work advising asylum seekers and migrants about their rights. In July, they imposed a special 25 percent tax on activities broadly defined as “portraying immigration in a positive light.” Another law previously passed in 2017 requires organizations to register as “foreign-funded organizations” if they receive over a certain threshold of financial support from abroad and to use this pejorative label at every public appearance – a legislation intended to discredit and demonize civic action.

In September 2017, **Poland** passed a law with adverse effects on civil society organizations, establishing a single government-controlled body in charge of overseeing the distribution of public funds to NGOs. Prior to its adoption, ODIHR raised concerns about the law, and urged lawmakers to provide safeguards limiting government interference in the body’s work. State-funded NGOs working on asylum and migration, women’s rights, and LGBT rights reported difficulties and delays accessing state funds granted to them.

In **Russia**, under the 2012 law, groups must register with the Justice Ministry as “foreign agents” if they accept any amount of foreign funding and engage in advocacy. In May 2014 Russia’s parliament amended the “foreign agents” law to authorize the Justice Ministry to register groups as “foreign agents” without their consent. To date the registry of “foreign agents” includes 74 organizations. Other groups have chosen to either give up foreign funding or close. Authorities also resort to the 2015 law on “undesirable organizations” to ban from the country an increasing number of foreign and international organizations and to sanction Russian groups and activists for any connections to them.

Azerbaijani authorities have decimated the country’s once vibrant civil society by adopting laws that maintain highly restrictive and punitive regulations on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), making it almost impossible for independent groups to operate. Laws and regulations require both donors and grantees to separately obtain government approval for every grant; and the authorities often deny this approval. Meanwhile, they have also convicted and imprisoned NGO leaders on bogus tax-related charges who failed to obtain such approvals. Many groups suspended their work or operate in exile.

In all cases mentioned above, such laws are adopted and implemented despite critical conclusions from independent institutions like ODIHR or the Venice Commission. We urge all OSCE participating the renew and demonstrate their commitment to implement the recommendations of such bodies and revise legislations that deeply affect their compliance with their obligations on freedom of association.