



## United States Mission to the OSCE

### **The Role of Civil Society in the OSCE Region**

As delivered by Chargé d’Affaires Courtney Austrian  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
September 30, 2021

In September, the Swedish Chairpersonship expressed its intention to focus on the theme of civil society. The work of civil society in our region is impressive, even more so given the additional challenges posed by the pandemic. All OSCE participating States have affirmed we value the important role played by civil society in ensuring full respect for human rights and democracy. Yet the operating space for civil society continues to be restricted in several participating States, in part as an obvious result of undue limits on peaceful assembly and association. In the OSCE’s region, some governments advance the falsehood that only by restricting human rights can societies ensure prosperity and security. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In **Russia**, civil society organizations, independent media outlets, and individuals designated as “foreign agents” by the government under selectively applied, restrictive legislation face stigma and onerous requirements. Groups designated “undesirable” or “extremist” have effectively had their peaceful work criminalized. Most recently, in the run-up to the September Duma elections, pressure tactics by law enforcement forced dozens of opposition politicians and civic activists to flee the country. In August, Russia’s leading independent election monitoring organization, Golos, was returned to the list of so-called “foreign agents.” Repression is ongoing against those who question the integrity of reported election results.

The world saw how **Belarusians’** right to peaceful assembly was brutally violated in the aftermath of the fraudulent 2020 presidential election, and we have spoken frequently in this forum on the relentless repression in Belarus. Clearly, the Lukashenka regime is out to crush independent civil society. In July, following police raids of NGO offices and individuals’ homes, the authorities began to shut down scores of prominent civil society organizations, including human rights groups such as *Viasna* – which has been carefully tracking the nearly 700 political prisoners in Belarus. The Belarus Helsinki Committee, one of the oldest human rights organizations in Belarus, and other NGOs face politically motivated criminal charges. Today, the Supreme Court will hold a hearing in the Ministry of Justice’s lawsuit to liquidate the Helsinki Committee; the organization will be unable to appeal the ruling if it is issued. The regime has perverted the rule of law; levied spurious allegations; restricted independent media and the public from observing court hearings; and eliminated these reputable, impactful civil society organizations’ ability to rely on the courts as independent arbiters. We stand with like-minded partners in support of the Belarusian people’s aspirations for a democratic, prosperous future in a free and independent country. We again urge the Belarusian authorities to accept the OSCE Chairs’ offer to facilitate a genuine dialogue with the democratic opposition and members of civil society leading to free and fair elections under international observation, including by the OSCE.

Several countries in Central Asia have implemented new onerous financial and programmatic reporting requirements for NGOs that can be misused to target, harass, or shutter organizations

which are critical of the governments. In **Kazakhstan**, legislation requiring independent NGOs to report on foreign funding sources and expenditures was misused for political purposes, threatening them with fines and closure, and having a broader chilling effect on civil society in the country. In **Kyrgyzstan**, a new NGO law based largely on Russia's restrictive legislation imposes onerous financial reporting requirements and further limits foreign-funded NGOs. In 2019, **Tajikistan** enacted a new law that imposed burdensome financial reporting requirements on NGOs. Since then, there has been an increase in the number of registration and tax inspections of NGOs by the authorities.

Restrictions on peaceful assembly and free association are an obvious challenge to civil society. Many provisions of Kazakhstan's new law on peaceful assembly, adopted in May, continue to restrict that right.

Within **Turkmenistan**, due to severe restrictions on the exercise of civil and political rights, independent civil society is virtually non-existent. But public protests over government policies have been regularly held by Turkmen dissidents abroad since Spring 2020, and NGOs have reported that protesters' family members still living in Turkmenistan have been harassed in retaliation.

With regard to the right to form, join, and effectively participate in trade unions, workers' freedom of association in **Uzbekistan** remains highly restricted, with few independent labor unions allowed to register or function within the country. We call upon Uzbekistan to fully implement its 2019 law on trade unions.

In too many OSCE states, the broader operating environment for NGOs and civil society is hostile. In **Azerbaijan**, we welcome the fact officials have reached out to NGOs and are reviewing legislation on NGO registration and operation, but existing laws continue to severely constrain NGO activities. For example, in March, women sought to exercise freedom of assembly to draw attention to domestic violence, but law enforcement officers prevented the gathering and forcibly detained the women. We also regret that restrictions in **Turkey** resulted in the banning of the Istanbul Pride Parade for the seventh straight year. Those who marched without a permit were met with riot police, rubber bullets, and tear gas.

In **Georgia**, there were violent attacks on journalists, civil society activists, and NGOs associated with a July Tbilisi Pride event. Law enforcement failed to protect the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and senior government officials did not condemn the violence. A number of arrests have been made, but to date, there have been no arrests of those who incited or organized the violence.

We thank the Swedish CiO for designating civil society as the monthly theme for September. Actions to limit the operating space for civil society take many forms – indeed some participating States have even exploited the pandemic for that purpose. Robust civil society institutions and engagement in their peaceful activities are not threats – rather these are assets. Participating States with robust civil societies are not just more democratic, they are also more resilient, prosperous, and secure. We urge all participating States to engage more fully with civil society and we look forward to doing so at HDIM once Russia stops its ongoing efforts to block the meeting.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.