

CENTRAL ASIAN REGIONAL ROUNDTABLE  
“FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION IN CENTRAL ASIA”

Welcoming Speech  
of Ambassador Andrew TESORIERE, Head of the OSCE Centre in Bishkek  
(Bishkek, 21-22 October 2009, “Hyatt” Hotel, 9.00)

Distinguished Ombudsman,  
Distinguished Chairman,  
Distinguished guests and participants,

**Let me warmly welcome you all and also thank Kyrgyz Ombudsman Tursunbek Akun at this regional and international round table. I am pleased that the spectrum of participants includes Parliament, Government, law-enforcement, judiciary and civil society representatives. I am also grateful for the invitation and the opportunity for OSCE to contribute to this roundtable.**

**With this opening words, let me continue to the substance of my remarks, which I shall give in English, the language in which the speech was drafted. You can find the Russian translation on channel.**

Freedom of association is intrinsic to the exercise by citizens of their right to express their opinions and to raise publicly issues of concern as well as their ability to contribute to their resolution.

Especially important, although sometimes politically sensitive, is the exercise of freedom of association by the society. It has always been at the heart of the struggle for democracy around the world, and it remains at the heart of society once democracy has been achieved. Without freedom of association, other freedoms lose their substance. It is impossible to defend individual rights if citizens are unable to organize around common needs and interests. As one UK labor leader put it, "Freedom of expression without freedom of association is the right to speak freely in the wilderness."

As such, this freedom, along with other human rights and freedoms, forms a vital part of the OSCE's comprehensive concept of security. Freedom of association is recognized in the OSCE human dimension commitments as well as all major international human rights instruments. Our Organization and its 56 participating States have undertaken to fulfil these commitments and promote conditions to their full enjoyment by everyone.

Over the last 10 years, the situation with NGOs has not become easier in a number of the OSCE countries - some changes have been introduced into NGO legislation aimed at tightening and maintaining the state control over civil society institutions,

with special attention given to those which receive foreign funding ; domestic NGOs in a number of participating States are being subject to more, and not less, pressure by state prosecutors, tax authorities, and security agencies.

Very recently we had the same situation in Kyrgyzstan. The Draft amendments to the Law on NGOs, proposed by a group of parliamentarians this February, have caused widespread disquiet both nationally and internationally. In its expert opinion, the ODIHR concluded that *“the existing legislation is in most respects compatible with the international standards. This level of compatibility would be significantly diminished were the proposed amendments to be adopted”*.

We acknowledge that freedom of association must be addressed in close collaboration with host governments. We need to defend importance of freedom of association, expression and of the mass media, which are cornerstones of OSCE values, by sharing international and European standards, aimed at incorporation of best international practices, and facilitation of inclusive partnership between authorities and civil society.

The trust and good will built-up between the OSCE and Central Asian States over past decade creates unique opportunities for enhancing diverse cooperation, including in the areas related to basic human rights. We appreciate transparent and open approach of Kyrgyz authorities in this regard.

In this context I can not but mention the Central Asian Regional Media Conference which was held in Bishkek last week.

The objective of today’s Roundtable is to offer government representatives and civil society organizations a platform for a joint review of the legislative framework regulating freedom of association in the Central Asia and its implementation.

The recommendations that will be formulated during the two coming days shall serve as a solid basis for improving freedom of association in the region and contribute to further strengthening of the wider process of confidence-building and partnership between the authorities and civil society

**Dear Colleagues,**

Freedom of association is a precious commodity which requires the exercise of considerable responsibility. We are upbeat that current level of cooperation and engagement in Central Asia will ensure joint, responsible approach in the attempt to find best solutions for legislative, political and societal issues related to the freedom of association.

We consider that our joint work is a sign of willingness to continue seeking best possible solutions. We shall not spare our efforts to engage in fruitful cooperation. The OSCE stands ready to provide support to Central Asia States in this endeavour.

**In closing, I would like to assure the participants from Kyrgyzstan that OSCE Centre in Bishkek will continue to seek to facilitate direct dialogue between authorities and civil society groups on the issues of freedom of association, and other related freedoms as well as assisting intra civil society exchange.**

**I wish this family roundtable constructive discussion and every success. Thank you for you attention.**