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Fundamental freedoms II, including: Freedom of movement; National human rights institutions and the role of civil society in the protection of human rights; Human rights education

As prepared for delivery by Ambassador Robert Bradtke, Head of Delegation
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The ability to leave and to return to one's country, and to move freely within one's own country, is a fundamental freedom which states are obligated to respect under international law. Some participating States, however, continue to take deliberate actions that interfere with the exercise of this fundamental freedom in contravention of international law and their OSCE commitments.

Uzbekistan continues to require exit visas for its citizens and for foreign citizens permanently residing in Uzbekistan, although it generally grants such visas. However, the government has denied and delayed issuing exit visas to prevent activists and human rights defenders from traveling outside the country. During the past year authorities refused to issue exit visas to artist Vyacheslav Akhunov, who is known for provocative performances critical of government policies, and local head of the Birdamlik political movement, Malohat Eshonqulova.

The government of Belarus has maintained a database of persons who may be banned from traveling abroad and, at times, used it to prevent travel of opposition politicians and civil society activists.

We welcome the decision of Turkmenistan to issue new biometric passports to Russian dual citizens, who will be able to travel to Russia and return to Turkmenistan at will. Although it is a positive step, we reiterate that governments should not interfere with persons leaving the country for reasons of their nationality, dual citizenship, or for political reasons.

Tajikistan has banned students from traveling abroad to attend religious schools and requires students who wish to study at religious institutions abroad to first obtain state permission.

Azerbaijan continues to prevent the foreign travel of Popular Front Party chairman Ali Kerimli by refusing to renew his passport. Since 2006, the government has cited an outstanding complaint against him from 1994 as the reason for the refusal, although it had renewed Kerimli's passport without objection on several occasions in the years since the complaint was filed.

With regard to freedom of movement of individuals residing lawfully within the territory of a state, the United States is deeply concerned about the accelerated installation by the

authorities of South Ossetia and Abkhazia of physical barriers, including permanent fences and berms, along the administrative boundary lines (ABLs) for the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions of Georgia. The erection of such barriers is not only inconsistent with Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, it impedes the exercise of freedom of movement in their own country by citizens and other lawful residents of Georgia, threatens local livelihoods and aggravates an already tense situation.

Principle VII of the Helsinki Final Act affirmed that civil society members, alone and in community with others, have "the right to know and act upon their rights," notably by monitoring and promoting the implementation of the commitments on human rights and fundamental freedoms to which we all have committed ourselves.

Yet since our last meeting government crackdowns on civil society – especially human rights defenders, NGOs and independent media – have intensified in several participating States. Although government officials often seek to justify crackdowns on peaceful civil society activity on national security grounds, these rationalizations turn the OSCE's concept of comprehensive security on its head. These crackdowns are short-sighted and ultimately counter-productive. The suppression of civil society promotes instability over the long term.

Russia's recent legislation affecting civil society includes branding peaceful civic organizations as "foreign agents" (carrying a strong implication of espionage and treason). This year's sweeping raids on thousands of civil society organizations across the country amount to modern-day witch hunts. My government rejects Moscow's comparisons of its legislation to U.S. and European law and calls on Russia to cease persecuting independent activists and groups that advocate for human rights and government accountability. We are especially troubled by the June beating of Lev Ponomarev, the 72-year-old head of a leading Russian human rights organization, and six others during a forcible eviction of the group from its offices in the middle of the night.

The Belarusian government continues to harass, intimidate, fine and detain human rights defenders and the independent media who report on government abuses. One of Belarus' most prominent human rights defenders, Ales Byalyatski, remains imprisoned. Among the tactics designed to weaken civil society is the denial of registration, warnings against those who act on behalf of an unregistered organization, and the use of tax and administrative measures against registered organizations such as the Belarus Helsinki Committee. We reiterate our call on the government of Belarus to release all political prisoners and to restore their civil and political rights.

In Uzbekistan, laws concerning NGOs place significant restrictions on their activities, including burdensome registration and funding requirements. In Turkmenistan, the formation and activities of NGOs also remain severely restricted, which hampers their ability to monitor human rights in the country. In January, Turkmenistan's President Berdimuhamedov issued a decree creating a state commission to supervise all foreign-funded "non-reimbursable, technical, financial, and humanitarian assistance/grants" and requiring that all such assistance be approved by the government. The decree covers all forms of non-governmental organizations, including religious groups, and prohibits outside funding for any unregistered activity deemed political.

Independent activists in Azerbaijan have been facing increased pressure, manifested by interrogations, detentions, legislation further restricting NGO financing, and the closure of

the facility of Free Thought University, a nonpartisan forum established by young activists to develop critical analytical skills and independent thinking.

We welcome Ukraine's 2012 Law on Charity and Charitable Organizations, which simplifies registration of civil society organizations and lifts several restrictions on civil society engagement. We are concerned, however, that in recent months independent activists are encountering greater scrutiny and pressure, including intimidation, arrest, and dubious criminal investigations.