



FREEDOM HOUSE EUROPE
<http://www.freedomhouse.eu>
<http://www.freedomhouse.org>

2009 OSCE HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING

Working Session 3 Freedom of Assembly and Association

September 29, 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Moderator,

Freedom House's annual study of democratization in 28 OSCE participating States *Nations in Transit* tracks the strength of civil society in each of these countries. The most recent edition of the study found that in 2008 civil society suffered setbacks in 11 countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the Russian Federation, Slovakia, and Tajikistan. The scores for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan stayed at the very bottom. The decline in the strength of civil society should be of serious concern to the OSCE and all participating States.

The deterioration of conditions for civil society in the new EU member states is disappointing. As the Nations in Transit report notes,

“Civil society played a critical role at the outset of democratic transition in the new EU member countries, and the NGO sector remains an integral part of these societies. However, restrictive legislation, undue administrative burdens, and lack of funding pose risks to their operation... Developments in 2008 suggest that the sustainability of civil society, even in consolidated democracies, cannot be taken for granted, and that threats to the sector grow if it is not supported by national and international donors as well as favorable legal and administrative frameworks.”

The challenges faced by civil society in non-Baltic former Soviet states were even more formidable. The subregion's average score for civil society dropped for the fifth time in six years in 2008. The generally hostile attitude of authorities toward civil society is by far the greatest problem. Legislation is just one of the instruments used to obstruct NGO operations. Using government-controlled media to stir up public opinion against NGOs is another common tactic. Regrettably, international support to the beleaguered NGO sector has been sporadic in some countries. For example, in Georgia a recent survey conducted by Transparency International, found that the Rose Revolution has "given rise to a mistaken perception among potential donors that large-scale financial support to develop civil society is no longer needed."

It is regrettable that the OSCE does not appear to be aware of this perilous situation facing civil society and appears to continue in a "business as usual" fashion. Programs to assist police in authoritarian countries are ongoing. Of particular concern is the police program in Kyrgyzstan, a country that, for the first time, this year entered the category of "consolidated authoritarian regimes" in our study. In Kyrgyzstan the number of public meetings the authorities allowed declined from hundreds held each year to just a handful last year. The OSCE has to decide whether it is in the business of promoting human rights or it is in the business of strengthening the repressive machinery of the authoritarian regimes in Kyrgyzstan and in the rest of Central Asia. In recent years it has appeared as if the OSCE is not at all concerned with the crackdown on the fundamental rights to freedom of assembly and association. While ODIHR protests in vain the new repressive legislation on public assemblies, the OSCE Centre in Bishkek continues to strengthen the security apparatus of the authoritarian regime.

Freedom House calls for an independent evaluation of past OSCE projects to assist police and security forces before it is continued, the speech of the Kyrgyz Interior Minister at the Permanent Council notwithstanding. Freedom House also calls on the OSCE to make concrete support for civil society the organization's top priority. We should caution that concrete support does not imply creation of various departments, focal points or other bureaucratic structures, a pattern that started to emerge in the organization some years ago, but rather assisting civil society organizations to strengthen and increase their capacity and efficacy.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.