



Dear Mr. Chairperson

In times of great crisis, such as now after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, one may lose focus of less dramatic problems in the sphere of human rights in the OSCE region. Likewise, when a country in a troubled region shows signs of economic progress and political stability, one may lose sight of its democratic shortcomings. In Central Asia, freedom of assembly is one such towering concern.

While some improvement has been evident in in Kyrgyzstan, freedom of assembly is fiercely curbed in all Central Asian republics.

In Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, the very concept of a peaceful demonstration without the interference of riot police remains inconceivable. Over the past year, even the most harmless of protests in Dushanbe, Tashkent, Ashgabat and Astana were stopped before they got started.

Nowhere in the OSCE region is the gap between theory and practice is greater than in the five Central Asian republics.

Kazakhstan is an economic leader in the region, striving to position itself internationally through diplomatic efforts. With increased status comes increased scrutiny.

Certainly, the right to hold peaceful assembly is enshrined in the Constitution of Kazakhstan. Yet, this right is not observed in practice. Underlying legislation requires that citizens follow a cumbersome path to apply for a permit, which as a rule is not given if the meeting is seen as critical of government policies. Individuals may not apply, only groups. Local authorities may designate particular places for meetings, where protesters will not be heard or seen. Understandably, some choose to express their opinion publicly without applying, leading to unproportionally large fines or up to 15 days of jail routinely being imposed on activists. Sometimes warnings are issued or arrests undertaken even before the planned date of a demonstration. Authorities treat harmless events such as flash-mobs, laying of flowers or collection of signatures for petitions in the same manner.

It should be noted here that in recent years, democracy as a whole has taken a turn for the worse in Kazakhstan. The already marginalized opposition has practically been eradicated through court orders and bans. Opposition leader Vladimir Kozlov remains in prison under difficult conditions.

Freedom of assembly is a cornerstone in any democracy. We therefore urge OSCE member states to raise this issue with Central Asian governments whenever possible, and for local OSCE offices to closely monitor developments and to immediately report on violations of citizens' constitutional right to freedom of assembly.