

Session 5 OSCE HDIM: Fundamental Freedoms II
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Freedom House

Protecting human rights defenders in the OSCE region is one of the most urgent, vital and basic tasks before all of us here today. Sadly, in many countries human rights defenders are vilified, threatened, harmed, imprisoned, and murdered for exercising their fundamental freedoms and trying to advocate for fellow citizens. Thank you to HRDs for continuing to work even and especially when your governments don't deserve your courage. I would like to thank the OSCE and urge the Ukrainian chairmanship that the year is not over yet.

Freedom House works in a number of countries in the OSCE region – Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, and Ukraine, to name a few – to help with fundamental questions on how obstacles can be overcome through joint civil society and government action.

There are other countries where we would be interested in doing work, but the conditions for human rights defenders are so difficult that we cannot even gain adequate access to effectively support these processes. I look to the governments of Uzbekistan, Belarus, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and increasingly Russia for particular reproach here. Human rights defenders in these countries face unthinkable pressure; can you imagine a situation where an independent journalist is driven to the woods to be threatened by the head of the Investigative Committee himself? This actually happened in Russia. It should not be a badge of pride for a country to be inhospitable to civil society and prepared to go to any lengths to silence human rights defenders. 1:30

But, rather than focus on what can't be done, I'd like to focus on what can. In Kyrgyzstan where Freedom House has been present for over a decade, we have been and will continue to assist in enabling key government-civil society institutions to become more effective in monitoring and reporting on human rights issues, and to see legislation and policy reforms comply with its constitutional and international commitments. We have worked closely with the government to implement the National Preventative Mechanism and Center against Torture as a civil society-government institution to monitor places of detention and provide recommendations for elimination of torture. Now civil society must ensure that the institution is independent and effective. In Kyrgyzstan, torture remains widespread, but progress is being made; an encouraging example of cooperation.

In Kazakhstan, Freedom House is engaging seriously, but without full satisfaction, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs human dimension working group. We have made a number of recommendations, including: to reform the national legislation related to freedom of peaceful assembly to expand the opportunities of citizens to engage in political debate. Based on our participation we are concerned that while the government of Kazakhstan has enabled a forum for dialogue there is not commitment to genuine engagement in positive resolution of human rights issues.

Finally, National Human Rights Institutions, such as Ombudsmen, should play a central role in supporting human rights. We just returned from Turkey where a fledgling ombudsman institution was just

established in 2012. We hope that it will develop in an independent manner so that it builds trust among civil society and can deal with citizen complaints. In Ukraine, based on meetings in the ombudsman's office and with civil society, we are encouraged that it is becoming a trusted advocate for human rights.

Governments and civil society can work for mutual benefit in a system where human rights institutions, legislation, and policies meaningfully address fundamental human rights issues. While this is a project for generations, it is achievable, not a utopian ideal.