

Resolution of the Conference
“Enabling the Civic Space for Freedom of Expression, Assembly and Association”
On Deteriorated Situation of Human Rights in the Black Sea Region

21 July, 2017

Kyiv, Ukraine

We, the participants of the Conference on “Enabling the Civic Space for Freedom of Expression, Assembly and Association”,

recognizing the important role of civil society at the local, national, regional and international levels in achievement of purposes and principles of international human rights law,

reaffirming that special emphasis should be given to measures to assist in the strengthening of a pluralistic civil society, including through the strengthening of the rule of law, social and economic development, the promotion of freedom of expression, the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association,

express our deep concern on account of deteriorated situation of human rights of civil society actors in the majority of the Black Sea region countries.

Particularly,

Governments repress the freedom of expression, association and assembly of the representatives of the civil society organizations, including media, and political parties.

With regards to media freedom, in some of the countries, such as Belarus, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia and Armenia, most print and broadcast outlets are affiliated with political interests posing strict censorship or providing manipulative information. In all the mentioned countries, as well as in Moldova and Ukraine, media is broadly controlled by government and oligarchs and faces interference into their policies. Some countries introduced restrictions on number of printing outlets or impose bans on social networks.

Moreover, a number of countries, such as Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkey, Armenia and Belarus got further criminally charging and detaining representatives of civil society organizations, including journalists and political activists, who express political opinions, participate in assemblies or criticize the regime. Due to the nature of criminal charges, lack of provision of due process guarantees and justifications of court decisions these people are confined for their conscience and expression of ideas and we consider them to be political prisoners.

It is unacceptable that countries, including those with recorded progress in human rights situation, undermine human rights for geopolitical interests when handing representatives of civil society to the countries where they face politically motivated charges.

In a number of countries, as of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia, Belarus, representatives of civil society organizations, including media, are attacked physically, intimidated and harassed.

In a number of countries, including Russia, Belarus, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, the exercise of freedom of peaceful assembly is accompanied with brutal interference by police, use of excessive and unjustified force following with arbitrary deprivation of liberty and charges against the participants, including journalists.

Gatherings, related to LGBT communities' issues are accompanied by threats and interference by nationalistic groups and religious extremists, with no legal consequences provided by law enforcement agencies such as in Ukraine, Turkey, Moldova and Georgia, while in countries like Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Belarus exercise of freedom of assembly by these communities even hardly imaginable.

In countries, such as Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus and Turkey no independent and effective investigation is conducted in cases of abovementioned violations and abuse leading to development of state-sponsored atmosphere of impunity.

In a number of countries, governments interfere with the freedom of association, posing unjustified restrictions on registration of civil society organizations. Restrictions of foreign funding and additional obligations imposed on NGOs advocating for public policy change, including in Belarus, Azerbaijan, and attempts for passing restrictive legislation in Moldova and Ukraine.

We emphasize that creating and maintaining a safe and enabling environment in which civil society can operate free from hindrance and insecurity assists States in fulfilling their existing international human rights obligations and commitments, without which equality, accountability and the rule of law are severely weakened, with implications at the national, regional and international levels.

For this, *we urge the States in the region*

- to respect and fully protect the rights of all individuals in light of their obligations under international human rights treaties, inter alia, the freedom of expression and opinion and to assembly peacefully and associate freely, online as well as offline, including for persons espousing minority or dissenting views of beliefs,
- to ensure their relevant laws and policies are in compliance with international standards, and seek the consult of international human rights bodies before adopting new laws or amending the existing legislation which can affect the exercise of freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and association,
- to ensure access to justice, and accountability and to end impunity for human rights violations and abuses against civil society actors,
- release all civil society representatives and politicians - prisoners of conscience in Turkey, Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, and close all cases against them immediately and without conditions,
- to ensure development of pluralistic media and free access to public related information.

We call upon the European Commission and European Parliament to have these issues as a main priority during the policy making towards non-EU countries of the Black Sea Region as well as put it on the table during their talks with governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine, concerned and to condition the cooperation with these countries by compliance with their commitments in this regards.

We call upon the Council of Europe and Organization for Security and Co-operation in the Europe to have these issues in the political agenda, raise those before the governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine, urging them to resolve mentioned issues and meet their international obligations in this regards.