

Report by the Special Representative on Civil Society Engagement,
Ms. Pia Kauma, to the Parliamentary Assembly,
July 2021

Two years ago, when we last met for an Annual Session in person, our Assembly adopted a very important decision considering how civil society engagement can help realize the aims and aspirations of the OSCE.¹ Since that time, and on the basis of that resolution, I have been honoured to serve as Special Representative on Civil Society Engagement. I appreciate the trust given to me to fulfil this role.

One of my first actions upon assuming this role was to write to all OSCE PA delegations welcoming your support and activity. Engaging civil society in our work is relevant for all of us, both in our international and our domestic parliamentary duties.

In the past two years I have used a range of approaches to fulfil my role. Whenever possible I have taken a quiet approach, arranging meetings between parliamentarians and NGOs who previously had not been granted an audience by authorities. I have also attended OSCE conferences to better understand the concerns and to speak about civil society participation, and I organized an NGO forum at our last in-person meeting here in Vienna. I have of course also met individually with many NGO experts, both in person and by video conference. My monitoring has led me to raise concerns a number of times – both in private and in public.

A shared concern for almost all I have spoken to is the shrinking space for civil society organizations, happening around the world. This has particularly been the case in Belarus, in Kazakhstan, in Kyrgyzstan, and in Russia. My monitoring has indicated efforts to pressure, confine or even shut down non-governmental groups through legislative or administrative measures. Burdensome registration procedures, pressure by tax authorities and demonization through labelling as “foreign agents” are only some of the thinly veiled efforts to silence independent voices.

You will not be surprised to hear that the widespread restrictions on freedom of assembly caused by COVID have also significantly reduced the space for public engagement. Sometimes NGOs have been innocent victims of these restrictions, but it is also very clear that sometimes enforcement of regulations has been targeted at critical civil society groups.

The difficult situation of NGO participation in OSCE governmental meetings also requires our continued attention. The OSCE long distinguished itself by organizing human dimension

¹ OSCE PA 2019 [Luxembourg Declaration](#); RESOLUTION ON THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY – INDIVIDUALS AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS – IN REALIZING THE AIMS AND ASPIRATIONS OF THE OSCE

meetings in which civil society actors had a seat at the table alongside governments. Unfortunately, lack of co-operation by some governments means that the OSCE is losing this strength. I appeal to all of you to ask your diplomats in Vienna how they are working to maintain open civil society engagement in the OSCE.

This organization is founded on the idea that we benefit from an open exchange of ideas. I therefore think it really is necessary to give NGOs a forum to be heard by OSCE governments. And of course the same is true of us as an Assembly: we should remain open to civil society participation.

As my current mandate as Special Representative comes to an end, I therefore conclude by asking all of you to take the time to listen to civil society actors when they approach you. By doing so you are not only helping them, but you are supporting the principles of our organization. The vocal engagement by experts and activists is critical to our work as parliamentarians and fundamental to an open and stable society. We should be open to hearing from them, and I hope we will all make efforts to this end in the coming years.