

Report by the Special Representative on Civil Society Engagement,
Ms. Pia Kauma, to the Standing Committee,
February 2021

The past year has been difficult on all of us, and has been exceptionally difficult for people working in the field of civil society activism. The energy and dynamism that has always been such a characteristic of non-governmental work does not translate well to the confines of a Zoom call.

Nonetheless, I have continued to monitor developments in the field and to raise concerns as they have occurred. I have particularly engaged with groups in Kazakhstan and Belarus, where groups have been vocal in raising concerns in recent months. I remain particularly concerned about efforts to pressure, confine or even shut down non-governmental groups through legislative or administrative measures. This has continued in the past year. Burdensome registration procedures, pressure by tax authorities and demonization through labelling as “foreign agents” are only some of the thinly veiled efforts to silence critical 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. This has effectively diminished the voice of many activists, simply adding to the difficulties that they were already facing in many OSCE countries.

A year ago at our Winter Meeting I hosted a side event focused on the shrinking space for civil society activities. Despite the challenges of COVID, I have worked to maintain dialogue with civil society actors since that time. Unfortunately I would say that they are even more concerned with their ability to have impact than they were a year ago. It is my hope that in the future further such events can take place, providing interested groups with an opportunity to raise issues directly with OSCE PA Members.

In the past I have also taken the opportunity to organize one-on-one meetings with specific national delegations to encourage interaction with civil society activists attending our meetings. While this is not practical in an online setting, I hope to again make use of this direct diplomatic approach in the future.

Colleagues, 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 would appreciate your support to this effort.

Thank you.