

Report by the Special Representative on Civil Society Engagement, Ms. Pia Kauma,
To the Standing Committee,
Vienna, February 2020

I assumed the duties as Special Representative on Civil Society Engagement at a difficult time. We hear very often that the space for civil society engagement is shrinking in many OSCE countries. This should be of concern to us all, and I hope to keep this issue high on the OSCE PA agenda.

Our OSCE Parliamentary Assembly sent a strong message in Luxembourg by adopting the resolution on the Role of Civil Society. I want to thank the American delegation that put this resolution forward and all those who supported it. As my work as Special Representative stems from this resolution, I recognise it is particularly important to my work.

You may recall that I reported in October that I participated in the OSCE's Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw. This meeting, the largest annual human rights meeting in Europe, serves as an excellent forum for interaction with governments and particularly civil society. I have built on the contacts that I established there and would encourage other OSCE PA Members to consider attending it in the future.

Colleagues,

I have been in touch on an individual basis with a number of delegations around this table. I cannot be, and do not want to be the voice of civil society to the OSCE PA. But I do hope to enable them to voice their opinions. As a result, one of the activities I have undertaken is to ask for individual meetings with some delegations. This is not only for me to understand developments, but to help facilitate dialogue directly with civil society representatives, when they have had difficulty establishing contact themselves.

Also on an individual, country-by-country basis, I am trying to monitor developments in the governance or regulation of civil society work. When necessary, I have and will continue to intervene with individual countries to encourage an open approach to NGOs and civil society. This is in the spirit of the OSCE and of our own Luxembourg resolution.

Finally, Colleagues,

A number of you participated in a side event that I was pleased to support yesterday, together with representatives from the Civic Solidarity Platform. I think that this was a useful opportunity to hear from a network of NGOs. They raised concerns related to the issue I mentioned about increasing limitations on civil society activities. Yesterday's event was the

first test, and 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. I hope to continue working with broad groups of civil society representatives to this end, and encourage all of you and your colleagues to attend and interact with these NGOs.

I do not hide that sometimes what these activists say will be criticism and it will be difficult for some of our Members to hear it. I suspect that I will not agree with everything that is said either. But in the spirit of Voltaire: I do not need to agree with what is being said to defend the right to say it.

The vocal engagement by experts and activists is critical to our work as parliamentarians and fundamental to an open and stable society.

There is one final note I would like to make: most of the NGOs that approach the OSCE PA work in the human rights field, but I want to be clear that my work is not restricted to this area. There are excellent NGOs addressing issues such as environmental concerns, arms reductions, poverty and many other topics. We should be open to all of them, and I hope we hear more from such groups in the future.

Thank you.