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2008 OSCE HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING

Working Session 16

Discussion of Human Dimension Activities

October 9, 2008

Freedom House would like to thank the organizers for this session which enables the participating States and the civil society to comment on the activities of the organization in the human dimension while noting that the session is regrettably scheduled for Yom Kippur.

Freedom House believes that the OSCE plays a crucial role in democracy and human rights issues and that the developments within the OSCE need greater attention. This is why Freedom House created an *OSCE Monitor* webpage on its website, which can also be found as a link on the OSCE website. The aim of the *OSCE Monitor* is to provide information and analysis on the developments in the organization affecting the human dimension.

Election observation is one area where the OSCE has distinct value to add to the democracy and human rights work. Freedom House strongly supports the notion that the current mandate of the ODIHR should be preserved and that the ODIHR's election work is simply the most valuable area of the work of the entire organization. The ODIHR's Election Department, created, along with the Democratization Department, by a 1997 Permanent Council Decision is, in our view, the most important structure of the

organization. Freedom House also welcomes the legislative support assistance work of the Democratization Department. Impressive work has been done in assisting the participating States to draft their anti-trafficking legislation. And in the area of fundamental freedoms, the ODIHR's legislative support work has been significant, with the *Guidelines on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly* standing out as a particularly outstanding piece.

We also welcome the work of the Representative on Freedom of the Media in bring to the participating States attention the cases of especially egregious violations, which are, regrettably, are still too many in the OSCE region. The work of the OSCE field Missions in the South Eastern Europe is also critical for consolidation of democracies in the Western Balkans.

But, there is also room for improvement and healthy criticism. The foreword to the 2007 ODIHR Annual report lists among the accomplishment of the last five years the creation of the Human Rights Department of ODIHR and the Human Rights Defenders' Focal Point in recent years. While Freedom House strongly supports the attention to human rights defenders, the creation of the new structures is not necessarily the answer if it represents a short-sighted and bureaucratic vision for the problems requiring action and a clear voice. The new structures should not be created if the only noticeable result is an increased number of coordination meetings between international organizations. We therefore urge the ODIHR Human Rights Defenders Focal Point to develop concrete activities to support human rights defenders rather than simply carry on the projects that predated the Focal Point's creation.

Freedom House's analytical work such as the annual *Nations in Transit* report on the state of democracy in the 28 participating States suggests that fundamental freedoms are most at risk in Central Asian states, for which the OSCE is the sole institutional link to Europe. Current debates about the geographical balance in the OSCE activities notwithstanding, almost all other OSCE participating States are members of other European inter-governmental organizations which also have mechanisms focusing on

human rights and democracy. Therefore, the increased attention of the ODIHR to Central Asia would be absolutely justified. However, this attention does not necessarily mean a plethora of projects, for it must be remembered that the situation in the region has not improved since the OSCE has begun the implementation of projects in the region. Rather a dialog and a clear voice on shortcomings is required, and this is what we expect from the OSCE.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Human Dimension meetings such as this one continue to play an important role for providing a platform for dialog involving the participating States and the civil society. It is only regrettable that some participating States chose not to attend the meeting or not be represented at a sufficiently high level throughout the meeting. It is also regrettable that a number of NGOs have encountered obstacles to receiving visas to travel to the HDIM, in particular at the Polish consulate in Almaty. Freedom House calls on the Polish authorities to rectify this situation as a matter of priority.

Finally, Freedom House would like to wish Ambassador Janez Lenarcic every success in his new post as the ODIHR Director.