Извините, этот текст доступен только в “Американский Английский”. For the sake of viewer convenience, the content is shown below in the alternative language. You may click the link to switch the active language.

We, members of the Civic Solidarity Platform (CSP), believe that restricting civil society participation in the work of the OSCE would be a tremendous setback for the Helsinki process and a betrayal of the spirit and founding values of this unique peace advancement initiative.

For four decades, civil society groups have played a crucial role in monitoring, documenting and reporting on the implementation of the human dimension commitments undertaken by participating States in the framework of the Conference and later the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. By engaging with the OSCE, NGOs have helped to keep human rights high on the agenda, mobilize attention to human rights crises and shape OSCE action on pressing human rights issues. Now some governments, which have adopted legislation and policies restricting civil society activities in their own countries, are pushing for new rules and regulations to limit civil society participation at the level of the OSCE. Introducing measures to this end would negatively and irreversibly affect the OSCE’s credibility at a time when civil society actors are facing unprecedented pressure across the region and, more than ever, need OSCE forums to make their voices heard.

The OSCE was the first international structure to embrace a comprehensive approach to security, with participating States agreeing to establish respect for human rights as one of its founding pillars and to be held accountable to each other and to their citizens for their achievements in this regard. When signing the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, states from both the then Western and Eastern bloc also acknowledged the right of individuals to know and act upon their rights, as well as to contribute to the Helsinki process, commitments that have

subsequently been reiterated in numerous OSCE documents. In addition, the signatories to the Helsinki Final Act undertook to publish and disseminate this document as widely as possible within their countries. The Helsinki Conference and Final Act inspired the emergence of so-called Helsinki groups in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to monitor compliance with the accords. Although these groups were forced to operate underground and were fiercely persecuted by their governments, they carried out their activities in a determined manner, supported by solidarity groups set up in Western countries. As we know from history, the Helsinki groups were part of the grassroots movements that helped bring about the collapse of the communist rule and the end of the Cold War. Both these pioneers and civil society groups that have continued their groundbreaking work have been guided by the belief that citizens' participation is an intrinsic element of the Helsinki process and thus of efforts to secure peace and prosperity in the OSCE region.

The current modalities for civil society participation in OSCE events are laid down in the Concluding Document from the 1992 Helsinki meeting, as well as Permanent Council decision no. 476 adopted in 2002. These regulations grant NGO representatives the right to participate and provide input on an equal footing with government representatives at human rights review conferences, implementation meetings and seminars on condition that they register with the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). States that seek to change these rules and restrict NGO access advocate for procedures that would grant governments the right to approve and thereby block the participation of civil society representatives, for example, because their organizations are not registered at the national level, they are considered to lack "relevant" experience or they are accused of supporting "extremism" or "terrorism". Any state approval procedure of this kind would be contrary to the basic principle of unhindered and equal NGO participation in OSCE events and

would open the door for arbitrary, selective, discriminatory and politically motivated decisions to limit access for organizations and individuals who criticize the policies of their governments and address issues that are inconvenient to them. In the past, some participating States have already sought to prevent the participation of outspoken civil society representatives from their countries at the annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting and other OSCE events.

Recent years have seen a growing trend of shrinking and even closing civil society space in many countries of the OSCE region.[i] As part of this trend, states have exploited security concerns to justify far-reaching restrictions on civil society and to crack down on NGOs that work on "sensitive" issues, in particular human rights. Among others, states have denied registration and forced NGOs to close down, labelled them "foreign agents", and prosecuted their leaders using broadly worded extremism and terrorism legislation that does not meet the fundamental principle of legality and can be applied to conduct that has nothing to do with violence.[ii] Human rights groups and defenders working to promote women's rights, minority rights and the rights of vulnerable communities have in particular been singled out for persecution. Repressive policies of this kind pursued at the national level must not be allowed to influence the procedures and rules for NGO participation at the OSCE level by allowing participating States to justify restricting access to groups that have been targeted merely for exercising their fundamental rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly in a peaceful and legitimate way.

Former UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association Maina Kiai has warned of the danger of closing civil society space at the international level because of the efforts of some governments to silence NGOs not only in their own countries but also on the international stage.[iii] Along with NGOs, he has criticized

the existing accreditation procedure for NGOs through the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the Committee on NGOs of which decides on UN consultative status for NGOs. Possessing consultative states grants NGOs access to a range of UN bodies and processes, including the Human Rights Council where they can deliver oral and written statements and organize side-events. As highlighted in a joint appeal signed by over 230 NGOs from over 45 countries in May 2016[iv], some states use the ECOSOC accreditation procedure to deliberately delay or block NGOs from participation at the UN, through perpetual questioning and repeated deferrals of applications for accreditation. This has resulted in that NGOs have been denied accreditation for years. Thus, through their actions, individual states have turned what is meant to be a primarily technical role of the ECOSOC NGO Committee into a politicized practice used to obstruct access for NGOs working on issues that they do not like. Human rights NGOs are amongst those facing the most obstacles in gaining accreditation.

As the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association has stressed[v], the misuse of the ECOSOC accreditation procedure to block NGO access has "profoundly undermine[d] the ability of the United Nations to constructively engage with civil society", with negative implications for the effectiveness and credibility of the organization as a whole. This example should serve as a warning to the OSCE. Rather than introducing any regulations or procedures that may be used to restrict NGO access for politically motivated reasons, the OSCE should focus on improving and further strengthening opportunities for NGOs to participate in and contribute to the work of the organization. To this end, the participating States should consider introducing new formats for government-civil society dialogue and civil society consultations, as a complement to existing ones.[vi] In accordance with its founding values, the OSCE has a responsibility to stand up for civil society organizations that are repressed and denied fundamental rights at home and

to provide a platform for them to voice their positions since they lack direct channels of communication with their governments.

The OSCE participating States have themselves repeatedly recognized that the involvement of civil society is crucial in achieving progress on the objectives of the organization and they have committed themselves to ensuring that members of civil society groups have unhindered access to the OSCE and other international organizations. The OSCE Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, which are based on OSCE commitments and universally recognized human rights standards, also require the participating States to refrain from any action undermining the right of human rights defenders to provide information, submit cases or participate in meetings with international bodies, including OSCE institutions.[vii]

As in the case of the UN, ensuring continued unhindered access for NGOs to OSCE events is not only a matter of safeguarding the rights of these groups and the communities they represent, but also of safeguarding the effectiveness, credibility and very *raison d'être* of the OSCE. The organization was established to promote peace, stability, democracy and the rights of the people of the vast region stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok rather than as a forum for governments to protect their interests. The recent attempts by some participating States to restrict civil society participation run counter to these objectives and may in themselves be considered early warning signs of threats to peace and stability in the OSCE region. The participation of civil society actors, who address crosscutting issues of human security, is a key element of the organization's comprehensive and inclusive security agenda and a precondition for the success of conflict prevention, democratization and peacebuilding processes in the long term. We appeal to all OSCE participating States to ensure that the organization continues to serve its founding role in years to come and that

government-civil society dialogue remains at the heart of the Helsinki process.

Signed by the following CSP members:
International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR, Belgium)
Bulgarian Helsinki Committee
Public Verdict (Russia)
Helsinki Committee of Armenia
Swiss Helsinki Committee
Macedonian Helsinki Committee
Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine)
DRA – German-Russian Exchange (Germany)
Kharkiv Regional Foundation “Public Alternative” (Ukraine)
Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights (Russia)
Union of Women of the Don Region (Russia)
Hungarian Helsinki Committee
Citizens’ Watch (Russia)
Protection of Rights without Borders (Armenia)
Human Rights Movement “Bir Duino-Kyrgyzstan”
Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law
Legal Policy Research Center (Kazakhstan)
Barys Zvozskau Belarusian Human Rights House
Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly-Vanadzor (Armenia)
Human Rights Matter (Germany)
Office of Civil Freedoms (Tajikistan)
Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (Poland)
Public Association “Dignity” (Kazakhstan)
Regional Center for Strategic Studies (Georgia/Azerbaijan)
Austrian Helsinki Association
Crude Accountability (United States)
Human Rights Center “Viasna” (Belarus)
Association of Ukrainian Human Rights Monitors on Law Enforcement (UMDPL)
SOVA Centre for Information and Analysis (Russia)
Article 19 (United Kingdom)

ZARA – Zivilcourage und Anti-Rassismus-Arbeit (Austria)
IDP Women Association “Consent” (Georgia)
Kosova Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims (KRCT)
Moscow Helsinki Group
Nota Bene (Tajikistan)
Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan
Netherlands Helsinki Committee
Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights (CILD)
UNITED for Intercultural Action (Netherlands)
Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Human Rights (Austria)
Promo LEX (Moldova)
Human Rights Group “Citizen. Army. Law” (Russia)
Humanrights.ch (Switzerland)
Fair Trials (United Kingdom)
Center for Participation and Development (CPD, Georgia)
Human Rights Monitoring Institute (Lithuania)
World Organization against Torture (OMCT)
Minority Rights Group Europe
Institute for Reporters’ Freedom and Safety (IRFS, Azerbaijan)
OSCE Network (Sweden)
Norwegian Helsinki Committee
Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) Germany

[i] See Hamburg Declaration on Protecting and Expanding Civil Society Space, adopted by the participants of the 2016 OSCE Parallel Civil Society Conference, Hamburg, 6-7 December 2017, http://www.civicsolidarity.org/sites/default/files/parallel_civil_society_conference_outcome_documents_hamburg_december_2016_final.pdf; as well as the outcome document of the 2017 OSCE Parallel Civil Society Conference, Vienna, 5-6 December 2017.

[ii] See the Vienna Declaration: Preventing Security Measures from Eclipsing Human Rights, adopted by the participants of the 2017 OSCE Parallel Civil Society Conference.

[iii] See comment at http://freeassembly.net/news/commentary-ngo-committee/

[iv] The appeal is available at https://www.ishr.ch/sites/default/files/documents/final_ecosoc_ngo_committee_english.pdf

[v] See http://freeassembly.net/news/commentary-ngo-committee/

[vi] For more recommendations on how to improve civil society participation in the OSCE, see the outcome document of the 2017 OSCE Parallel Civil Society Conference, Vienna, 5-6 December 2017.

[vii] Par. 91 of the Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, http://www.osce.org/odihr/guidelines-on-the-protection-of-human-rights-defenders?download=true