68th GA, Third Committee  
Agenda Item 69 b and c  

Quadrilateral Statement on the role of civil society

Mr. Chairman,

distinguished delegates,

I am making this statement on the role of civil society for the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on behalf of Liechtenstein, Slovenia, Switzerland and my own delegation, Austria.

Our countries share the conviction that an active, free and thriving civil society is an essential element of functioning societies that adhere to democracy, human rights, good governance and the rule of law; there can be no doubt that civil society plays a crucial role for holding states accountable and for advancing human rights also at the regional and international level.

However, all too often civil society representatives, whether they are NGOs, human rights defenders, bloggers, activists or journalists face numerous legal and practical restrictions to their work and are intimidated, subjected to repression and in extreme cases even threatened with the loss of life and limb in interference with their rights to freedom of opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association.

In her statement to the Third Committee last week, High Commissioner Pillay pointed to the alarming trend of intimidation and harassment of civil society actors for their cooperation with the United Nations and the rise of reprisals against human rights defenders. In the work of the UN’s human rights mechanisms, civil society’s suggestions and expertise are a necessary part of a constructive and meaningful dialogue aimed at improving the implementation of international human rights obligations. Let me mention in this regard that we welcome the OHCHR’s work to promote the space for civil society as well as the resolution adopted recently by the Human Rights Council on the issue of reprisals (HRC/RES/24/24).

While we fully recognize the intergovernmental nature of the United Nations, civil society representatives need to be able to share their experience, insights and recommendations in public meetings of the UN and in particular in high level meetings and conferences. Time and again we have expressed our concern and disappointment over efforts to restrict the participation of civil society representatives, and in particular of NGOs which are not in ECOSOC consultative status, in high level meetings such as the one last May on the Appraisal of the UN Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons.

Unfortunately, the non-objection procedure allows for the exclusion of legitimate stakeholders for political motivations without accountability. Selection processes for the participation of NGOs in high level meetings should be completely transparent and both UN Member States and the NGOs concerned should be able to access the information who objected to the participation of particular NGOs and for what reasons.
Our four delegations will continue to demand the respect of such minimal standards in the future.

Let me conclude by saying that we as Member States not only have a responsibility to create and protect an enabling environment for civil society and to allow for their meaningful and unhindered participation in our work – be it in our national efforts or here at the UN – but that ultimately we can only benefit from their contributions.

Thank you.