SECRETARY CLINTON: Well, good afternoon, and let me begin by thanking Yuri and all of you for being here today. I also wish to thank the Tolerance Center for hosting us. There could hardly be a better setting for this meeting. And I think the work that civil society is now doing – the Parallel Conference, the recommendations, the Civic Solidarity commitment, the Internet Fundamental Freedoms Initiative – all of that added together is going to help fill that gap, which I agree does exist.

And if one looks back over the last 50 years, the Helsinki commitments were among the most important human rights statements and drivers of action that we found anywhere in the world. And I wish that they were no longer needed. I wish that we could bid them farewell because they had done their job. But the fact is – and you know this better than anyone – we see them even more necessary today because of some of the trends that are developing.

Across the OSCE region, what you do and the organizations that you are part of and lead are helping to define the front lines of the struggle on behalf of human rights and democracy for the 21st century. I should begin by saying I know your work is incredibly difficult. I know that the times in which you are working are increasing challenging and even dangerous. I know that funding is scarcer than it should be and that there are governments trying at every turn to undermine what you do and what you stand for.

But please know that the United States supports your efforts, because we think that the work of civil society is more important than ever. If we needed reminding on the events of this last year, particularly in Belarus but also in North Africa and the Middle East and elsewhere, demonstrates unequivocally that peace and stability depend just as much on meeting people’s aspirations for dignity, freedom, and opportunity as they do on military security.

And the change that we’re now seeing has such great potential to move the world ever closer to full equality and human rights for everyone. Technology is making it easier to come together to take common actions. Individual activists have transformed societies from Tunisia to Egypt to Libya. But we don’t yet really know the outcome of so much of what is going on today. Will it advance the cause of human freedom and dignity, or will it not? And certainly, I’ve raised a number of issues at this morning’s ministerial that are
deeply concerning to us: violations of the freedom of expression, association, assembly, religion; perversion of justice; attacks on human rights defenders and journalists.

And as we meet in this Center of Tolerance, there are just too many people, even in the OSCE region, who are being denied their rights and living in an atmosphere in which intolerance seems to be on the rise. Minorities, religious minorities, Jews, Roma, LGBT communities – all of them and other vulnerable people are facing prejudice and even violence.

And I wanted to commend what civil society is doing here in Lithuania. Eight leading civil society organizations have formed a national coalition to promote tolerance. I think that’s very timely. And it’s not only beginning already to have an impact, but it demonstrates the kind of collaboration we need more of.

Governments need feedback – certainly governments within societies but, of course, governments outside that can be your allies in trying to promote change. We used to measure government accountability by the metrics of multiyear election cycles, annual assessments by international organizations. But today, with Tweets and text messages, blog posts, interactive maps, civil society is making judgments in real time. And I welcome this new Civic Solidarity Platform because I think it will upgrade the ability that we need for human rights monitoring throughout the region.

Now, unfortunately, a number of governments continue to view civil society as adversaries instead of partners. We’ve just witnessed a flawed Duma election in Russia, including efforts to halt the election monitoring by Golos, a respected independent civil society organization. And Golos’s work is exactly the type of activities that countries committed to the rule of law should welcome and countries that are members of the OSCE signed up to support. It is strictly nonpartisan; its only goal is to promote elections that are transparent and fair. But in the last few days, its members have been hauled into court, its website has been subjected to massive cyber attacks, and its motives have been maligned.

So for us, it is just an article of faith that democracy is not only about elections; but in the absence of free, fair, transparent elections, it’s hard for democracy to be sustained.

And I wanted to speak clear that regardless of where you live, citizenship requires holding your government accountable. And those of us in government may not always like the hard questions. We may not appreciate the criticism. It does seem sometimes to those of us on the other side in government that we’ll never satisfy civil society. But that’s the kind of necessary and healthy tension that should exist in a democracy in order to sustain trust and progress, to uphold the rules that govern democratic societies, first and foremost, the rule of law. And in fact, allowing groups like Golos to do their work is a really critical part of sustaining trust and faith in government and enabling leaders to be able to govern.
So the other initiative that Yuri talked about, which is the cyber space initiative, is especially important because cyber space, after all, is the public square of the 21st century. I said earlier that today's activists hold the Helsinki Accords in one hand and a smart phone in the other. And that has unnerved a lot of governments, so governments are now working overtime to try to suppress access to the internet, free assembly and association, and speech within cyber space. And that's one of the reasons why the United States and about two dozen other delegations have pressed for the adoption of a declaration on fundamental freedoms in the digital age, because we believe human rights need to be respected both online and off.

So I know you've been working hard for several days now, and I really, first and foremost, want to thank you for caring enough and being committed enough to come to Vilnius to be part of this civil society effort, and to encourage you to continue because we need you now more than ever.

And I want to say a special word about Belarus. I was just privileged to meet with a number of activists, human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, NGO leaders from Belarus, who are working so hard to restore a sense of human rights, freedom, and dignity to the Belarusian people. I travel around the world talking about human rights. Mike Posner conducts human rights dialogues in many places where there's a long way to go before human rights are even acknowledged. We understand that and we know we have to travel this long journey together. Mike was with me in Burma just a few days ago, where we see slight flickers of progress and where we want to support them.

But it is absolutely inconceivable that in Europe today, in December of 2011, the Lukashenko regime is behaving as it is behaving. And therefore, we all have a stake in speaking out even more forcefully, raising even greater public concern in Europe, the United States, and beyond, to make it unequivocally clear to the Lukashenko government that their behavior is unacceptable and they have to begin to reflect and respect the aspirations of the people of Belarus.

So I will look forward to working with you. I thank you for giving me this homework, Yuri. I will take it and work through it with you, along with my colleagues. And I will take very seriously your point about making sure that the gap between stated commitments and actual actions in the OSCE is narrowed and not widened in the year ahead.

Thank you all very much.

See the article online: http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/12/178313.htm

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