



United States Mission to the OSCE

International Human Rights Day

As delivered by Political Officer Zsafia Budai
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
December 14, 2023

Seventy-five years ago on December 10, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or UDHR. This was a remarkable document, asserting for the first time that all human beings are equal in rights and dignity, no matter where they live or who they are, and that it is the responsibility of governments across the world to protect their rights. The values and commitments enshrined in the Declaration have been incorporated into numerous international treaties, regional human rights instruments, and national legal codes. This includes the Helsinki Final Act, thus forever tying the founding of our own organization to the UDHR.

Although we have seen extraordinary progress since 1948 in realizing the promise of the Declaration, in recent years we have also witnessed the erosion of human rights, fundamental freedoms, and democratic principles across the OSCE region. Nowhere is this more evident than in Russia's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine. Since its launch, members of Russia's armed forces have committed war crimes and other atrocities and abuses. The October 20 report by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine to the UN General Assembly and ODIHR's December 12 "Fourth Interim Report on reported violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in Ukraine" confirmed previous findings of widespread and systematic torture, rape, violence, and abductions committed by Russia's armed forces or authorities in the Russia-occupied parts of Ukraine.

At the same time, the Kremlin has increased its crackdown on human rights and fundamental freedoms within its own borders, partly in an attempt to quash opposition to its war against Ukraine by silencing all of its domestic critics. On November 16, a St. Petersburg court sentenced artist Aleksandra Skochilenko to seven years in prison for placing five anti-war stickers in a grocery store. This was just the latest in the two decades' worth of incremental and calculated restrictions that have "culminated in the current state policy of criminalizing any actual or perceived dissent," as Mariana Katzarova, the UN's Special Rapporteur for Russia, stated in her September 21 report.

The space for independent media, opposition political parties, and civil society organizations to exist outside of the Kremlin's strict control is practically non-existent. Russian authorities are even trying to criminalize entire groups of people, including through a November 30 Supreme Court ruling declaring the so-called "international LGBT movement" an "extremist organization." Human rights activists fear this ruling will grant authorities even more power to arbitrarily prosecute any individual or organization connected to or perceived to be connected to advocacy for the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons and advance state-sanctioned homophobia by further tying members of the LGBTQI+ community to extremism. This decision impacts the human rights of all individuals living in Russia and undermines freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association.

We are deeply concerned for the wellbeing of Aleksey Navalny following his lawyers' reports that they have been unable to contact him for several days and his failure to appear at a recent court hearing. The international community is watching closely, and we have conveyed to Russia's government it is responsible for what happens to Mr. Navalny in their custody. We call for Mr. Navalny's immediate release without conditions and strongly condemn Russia's malicious targeting of Navalny and more than 600 other political prisoners it has imprisoned.

As the Moscow Mechanism report published this past May detailed, the human rights situation in Belarus has deteriorated significantly since the fraudulent presidential election in August 2020. Taking a cue from the Kremlin, the Lukashenka regime has abused counterterrorism and anti-extremism legislation to further purge civic space, suppress freedom of expression, and eradicate political opposition, as Anaïs Marin, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Belarus noted on October 26. On December 8, Belarusian authorities detained two journalists – former Ranak TV channel editor Yulia Dauletava and correspondent Lyudmila Andenka – and accused them of contributing to extremist activities, a charge that carries up to seven years in jail. If convicted, they could join the estimated 1,500 political prisoners currently behind bars in Belarus for exercising the human rights and fundamental freedoms reflected in the UDHR and the Helsinki Final Act.

The recent trend of detaining journalists in Azerbaijan is deeply troubling. We continue to urge the Azerbaijani government to respect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all, including those exercising freedom of expression. We call for the expeditious release of all those unjustly detained, including Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu, whose deteriorating medical condition is serious, and democracy/human rights activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev.

Discrimination persists throughout the OSCE region, keeping members of various marginalized racial, religious, ethnic, and Indigenous communities, women and girls, refugees, and LGBTQI+ individuals from fully enjoying and exercising their human rights. ODIHR's fourth status report on the implementation of the action plan to improve the situation of Roma and Sinti, published on December 8, details significant progress since 2003 – but also notes ongoing challenges and barriers to inclusion. Roma and Sinti men and women still lack equal opportunities to health care, housing, and employment. Discriminatory and racist attitudes – often fueled by extremist political rhetoric – persist among law enforcement, local authorities, and employers. The lack of representation in decision-making bodies limits Roma and Sinti activists' ability to advocate for their communities.

December 10 also marked the culmination of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence, an important reminder that women and girls of all ethnicities continue to suffer gender-based violence. The Western Balkans continues to witness alarming cases of sexual harassment, rape, and the targeted killing of women. According to activists, although most countries in the Western Balkans have passed laws and regulations to combat violence against women, the implementation remains incoherent. Authorities sometimes fail to respond to threats and violence against women until they escalate to even more dangerous levels. Women in Central Asia continue to suffer from high rates of gender-based violence stemming from deeply rooted patriarchal norms and inadequate law enforcement.

Protecting and promoting human rights is a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy, and the United States remains committed to championing human rights across the globe. We take

seriously our commitment to uphold human rights as an OSCE participating State and to hold other participating States to account while improving our own efforts to safeguard fundamental freedoms. We value, applaud, and support human rights defenders, civil society activists, labor organizers, and independent journalists, all of whom often face harassment, intimidation, and even physical attacks for standing up for the rights and dignity inherent in every human being and for exposing abuses. As we mark the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, let's remember that societies that protect and promote respect for human rights are stronger, more prosperous and resilient, and more capable of resolving differences peacefully.

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