

RFE Statement
OSCE Review Conference, Astana, November 26 2010

ENGLISH only

RFE broadcasts to 17 OSCE countries, or almost one third of its member states. We are a surrogate media company, providing independent and uncensored information in countries that restrict media freedom. RFE maintains news bureaus and correspondents in each of these 17 countries except for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Reporting in local languages for local audiences and subject to local laws and political pressures, we are part of the local media landscape. The challenges RFE journalists face to report independently, professionally and safely are the reality for every other independent journalist and news outlet in these member states.

RFE's presence in these countries testifies to the suppression of local alternatives to state-controlled information and news. The restrictions employed by member states to stifle media freedom affect all platforms, whether print, broadcast or electronic, and violate members' explicit international commitments, not to mention their own sovereign laws. RFE joins with other nongovernmental organizations to urge the OSCE to affirm its watchdog status and relevance by enforcing the obligations of member states to promote and protect media freedom and keep journalists safe. This statement addresses the status of RFE journalists and operations in Russia, including the North Caucasus, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Russia

RFE/RL expresses grave concern about the life and death conditions that journalists face in Russia. While RFE/RL journalists have not been the targets of violence recently, we speak in solidarity against attacks on colleagues that are numerous, savage and fatal. The attack this month on Oleg Kashin is only the most recent example. Independent commentator Vladimir Ryzhkov has written that 350 journalists in Russia were beaten in the past five years. The Committee to Protect Journalists reports three journalists killed in 2009 and 19 since 2000, and ranks Russia as the fourth most dangerous country for journalists in the world.

In addition to physical violence, Russia uses other tools to silence its critics, many of which have been replicated by other OSCE member states. Independent journalists face the vengeance of the criminal justice system. The defamation verdict against Khimki editor Mikhail Beketov is a recent case, but there are countless other examples of the authorities' use of laws on libel, defamation and extremism to criminalize free speech and intimidate and punish journalists.

Apart from judicial activism, judicial inaction has put journalists in danger by breeding impunity. Since the last OSCE summit, impunity has become systematic in Russia, suggesting that not only is it acceptable to abuse, terrify and murder journalists but that state institutions will enable and abet such crimes. Since then, CPJ has cited no fewer than 18 murders of Russian journalists, none of which have been solved. Ryzhkov claims that of 31 reported attacks against journalists this year, not one has gone to trial.

Finally, political bullying is a potent means of censorship and control that has affected RFE directly. This pressure has been used to intimidate local FM affiliates that rebroadcast RFE programs. In 2004 nearly 30 local affiliates carried RFE broadcasts to audiences across the Russian Federation. Today, fewer than three affiliates continue to rebroadcast RFE shows. This week, after being threatened with losing their license, our long-time Chelyabinsk affiliate discontinued our broadcasts, effective December 1.

RFE calls on the OSCE to enforce Russia's commitments to safeguard the free provision of and access to information and meaningfully prosecute crimes against journalists.

Chechnya

RFE reports that in the North Caucasus, and in Chechnya in particular, independent journalism is almost extinct. Two RFE correspondents resigned from our small Chechen service this year after security agents threatened their families. The absence of any independent reporting from this highly volatile and strategic region is increasingly likely.

RFE calls on the OSCE to reopen its mission in Chechnya, which closed in March 2003, to monitor and encourage compliance with international law and provide support to journalists in trouble.

Belarus

RFE reports an official campaign during late spring and summer 2010 in which authorities used accreditation to intimidate members of its Minsk bureau. One correspondent was stripped of accreditation, another was threatened for working without accreditation and as a result resigned, the bureau chief was repeatedly summoned and interrogated by local security agents and the Foreign Ministry threatened to withdraw accreditation from RFE's entire Minsk staff. This is in addition to the routine harassment and intimidation that RFE correspondents in Belarus confront.

RFE calls on the OSCE to press the Belarusian government to refrain from using accreditation as a tool of coercion and eliminate RFE's accreditation quota.

Moldova

RFE protests the arrest of journalist Ernest Vardanean by authorities of Moldova's breakaway region of Transdniester on April 7 on charges of high treason. Vardanean's trial, from which OSCE monitors have been barred, began earlier this month and continues behind closed doors. He was a contributor to RFE and was poised to begin an assignment blogging for our Moldovan language website.

RFE calls on the OSCE to protest Vardanean's unsubstantiated detention, forced confession and closed-door trial and demand his release.

Azerbaijan

RFE protests a ban from FM and MW frequencies that dates from 2009 and which the government justified as necessary to bring the country's media practices in line with "European standards." RFE also expresses concern about the vilification of its Azeri

service by official organs and media, including during parliamentary elections last month. Finally, however much we celebrate the release from prison of Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizada, it should not obscure the government's arbitrary treatment of critics and persistent efforts to punish free speech.

RFE calls on the OSCE to press the government to comply with international standards for media freedom and restore RFE's access to local airwaves.

Turkmenistan

RFE reports the absence of even minimal conditions for maintaining a bureau in Turkmenistan, despite the country's OSCE commitments. In addition to routine blacklisting, harassment and surveillance, correspondents and family members of RFE's Turkmen service were targeted in a series of incidents this fall that included interrogation, travel restrictions, summary dismissal from jobs, interference with schooling and threats of criminal prosecution. The government has also repeatedly ignored RFE's applications for accreditation of its correspondents and blocks its website and phone lines.

RFE calls on the OSCE to protest the persecution and blacklisting of RFE journalists and their family members and to press the government to recognize RFE's Turkmen service.

Uzbekistan

RFE reports the absence of even minimal conditions for maintaining a bureau in Uzbekistan. The recent arrest and conviction of Voice of America correspondent Abdumalik Bobaev on charges of "illegal journalistic activity," and the persistent imprisonment and torture of other local journalists testify to the extent to which the government criminalizes independent journalistic activity and free speech. Even Turkmenistan tolerates a handful of RFE correspondents; since the Andijan massacre in 2005, Uzbekistan does not. In addition, RFE's Uzbek language website is continuously blocked and persons associated with the service are vilified in official media. Indeed a 2008 pseudo-documentary produced by the government profiles individual RFE contributors and accuses them of crimes against the state. It's currently available in Uzbekistan on DVD.

RFE calls on the OSCE to protest the criminalization of free speech and press the government to recognize RFE's Uzbek service.

Kazakhstan

RFE reminds the OSCE of a cyber attack in 2008 that involved Kazakhstan's state-run internet provider and that blocked RFE's Kazakh website for over seven weeks. Kazakh authorities never provided an explanation for the blockage. RFE maintains an active bureau in Almaty, but its journalists have been subject to sporadic physical attacks and unlawful detention.

RFE calls on the OSCE to urge Kazakhstan to abide by its international obligations to promote and protect media freedom.