



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on World Press Freedom Day 2016

As delivered by Ambassador Daniel Baer
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
May 5, 2016

World Press Freedom Day was marked on May 3, as a day when we celebrate a right enshrined in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which provides in part that everyone has the right, “to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” On World Press Freedom Day we pay special honor to the value of a free press and those journalists who are both the symbols and brave practitioners of it. As Secretary Kerry has stated, “Committing journalism, reporting on the truth, is not a crime. It is a badge of honor.”

Journalists, editors, and other workers in the media are subject to many types of repression for conducting their work via traditional media or online: in many countries around the world, including in some OSCE participating States, they have been jailed for reporting the facts, disseminating opinions or exposing wrongdoing; they or their outlets are censored, attacked, threatened, shuttered, or harassed. And when media and journalists are silenced, the peoples’ voices go silent; accountability erodes, putting democratic governance and other rights and freedoms at risk. That is why defense of a free press is central to the work of the U.S. government’s global promotion of human rights.

Over six days preceding World Press Freedom Day, for the fifth time, the United States highlighted one case of an imprisoned journalist each day in our daily press briefing in Washington. We do this because it’s important to not only reaffirm the principle of freedom of expression but also to say the names of real people in real places who have had their rights violated.

Governments are responsible for doing their utmost to protect all individuals, including journalists from physical harm and intimidation for exercising their duties, and when journalists are the victims of crimes, governments are responsible for investigating those crimes and bringing the perpetrators to justice. Unsolved murders and other physical attacks on journalists have created a climate of impunity in a number of participating States that has a chilling effect on the exercise of freedom of expression, by members of the media as well the public more generally. We are also concerned that overly restrictive laws on freedom of expression that play on the fear of terrorism to silence opposing viewpoints seem to be the norm in many states.

Regrettably, not all participating States have adhered to their OSCE commitments in supporting freedom of expression, including by members of the media. Unfortunately, in too many places in the OSCE region, a free press is under attack by governments that want to avoid the truth or mistrust the ability of their people to make their own decisions.

In Uzbekistan, a newspaper editor named Muhammad Bekjanov has remained in prison since 1999, on various apparently politically motivated charges. His incarceration is the longest ongoing incarceration of a journalist in the world, by many accounts. Mr. Bekjanov's original sentence has been extended several times for alleged infractions of prison rules. His health reportedly has deteriorated over the past 16 years and he is in urgent need of medical care. As in years past, we highlighted Mr. Bekjanov in our Free the Press Campaign. We call on the Government of Uzbekistan to release Mr. Bekjanov, and to take steps necessary to create space for independent journalists to work freely and without fear of violence or other reprisals. We also underscore the recent concern expressed by Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFOM) Mijatović about new overly-broad anti-terrorism legislation that could have a chilling effect on media in Uzbekistan.

In Turkmenistan, the government continues to censor and control publication of almost all books and print media as well as radio and domestic television; subjects foreign journalists to surveillance and harassment; limits and monitors citizens' Internet activity; and curtails research in academic and cultural areas. We urge the government to respect the right to individual freedom of expression guaranteed by both the Turkmenistan Constitution and the ICCPR.

In Azerbaijan, while we welcomed the recent releases of a number of journalists and civil society activists, we look forward to further work with Azerbaijan on additional positive steps. We continue to urge the government to release the remaining individuals widely considered to have been incarcerated for exercising fundamental freedoms, including noted journalist Khadija Ismailova. We join others in congratulating her on the UNESCO prize.

In Russia, ongoing harassment of media NGOs advocating for media freedom, independent journalists, and bloggers critical of the government or its policies has had a chilling effect on freedom of expression. The EU has raised a number of particular cases where the Russian government has not met its commitments. On May 2, the last day of our Free the Press campaign for 2016, State Department spokesman John Kirby called attention to the case of Sergei Reznik—a journalist who has criticized municipal and regional authorities in Russia and uncovered local corruption. Mr. Reznik has been physically attacked for his work, and now sits in prison. Not only has the government failed to hold his attackers accountable, consistent with a larger pattern of impunity in Russia for those who attack journalists, it now has imprisoned the victim. We call on the Russian government to release Sergei Reznik immediately and to end the laws and practices that stifle freedom of expression and the flow of news, information, and opinion.

In Turkey, we echo the recent statement by RFOM Mijatović in condemning the sentencing of two Turkish editors from the daily Cumhuriyet, Ceyda Karan and Hikmet Çetinkaya, to two years in prison. Other recent actions against Turkish journalists, including the government trusteeship of the Zaman media group, seem designed to restrict freedom of expression. Media organizations should have the freedom to use their independent professional judgment in determining what they publish.

Ongoing issues related to safety of journalists across the OSCE region have been highlighted in several recent statements from the RFOM. We call on all participating States to ensure attacks against journalists are swiftly investigated, and that all perpetrators and masterminds do not go unpunished.

We once again encourage all participating States to avail themselves of the Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media to assist them in adhering to their OSCE commitments. For our own part, the United States carefully reviews her public statements and her private communications letters to the U.S. government about our country, and we follow up with her office. After all, she is fulfilling her mandate in both offering support for full implementation of our shared OSCE commitments related to freedom of expression, including the media, and identifying areas for improvement to meet our commitments.

Representative Mijatović and her team can be an invaluable resource. Ukraine, for example, has taken steps advocated by Ms. Mijatović to enhance media freedom as a part of the government's reform agenda. As reform progresses, we urge Ukraine to continue to engage with Ms. Mijatović and to take seriously her recommendations as well as expressions of concern. We have noted the recommendations that RFOM has made to our friends in Armenia, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, Serbia, Ukraine, and others in recent months.

We once again encourage all participating States to avail themselves of the Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media to assist them in adhering to their international obligations and OSCE commitments related to freedom of expression.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.