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United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Report by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires, a.i. Harry Kamian
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
November 9, 2017

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The United States warmly welcomes Representative on Freedom of the Media Harlem Désir to the Permanent Council. Mr. Chair, I apologize, I went to bed a little later last night than usual and I've only had a couple of cups of coffee, but in reading the report and listening to the presentation, you [*addressing Harlem Désir*] didn't come across as the slightest bit nervous to me. Thank you for your calm, thoughtful presentation, your very detailed report and, more importantly, your principled advocacy for a very, very important issue that we're dealing with here in the Council. So thank you very much. You and your team play an extremely valuable role in defending journalists and freedom of expression, and the United States urges all participating States to avail themselves of your assistance and expertise in addressing shortfalls in upholding our shared commitments.

The United States supports the RFOM's focus on the centrality of freedom of expression to comprehensive security for all OSCE participating States. The deterioration of respect for freedom of expression, jailing of and attacks on journalists, attempts to unduly restrict freedom of online expression, and undue limits on the free flow of information via state monopoly and/or state control of the media – these are warning signs that the human dimension of security is at risk. Much is said in the OSCE about early warning, and the work of you and your office is one of our best early warning systems.

You mentioned in your presentation the one-hundred-plus interventions that you've made since taking your office, and those include a few that touch upon the United States. Do you and I see eye to eye on each and every one of those issues that you raised? Probably not. But I think as a sign of the strength of our democracy and our commitment to the OSCE, we owe you an opportunity to express those views, I owe you the opportunity to engage me and other members of the United States constructively, and at a minimum to sit down and have an honest, open, frank dialogue about the challenges – and you will have that commitment from me during your tenure here.

As I mentioned sir, the United States welcomes the constructive dialogue with you and your office on the U.S. record of upholding and promoting a free and open press -- this is a fundamental value of the United States reflected in our Constitution. We've received your letters and we note the references to them in your report. We take them extremely seriously. We take very seriously allegations of police overreach and/or misconduct and, when necessary, our Department of Justice gets involved in investigating and prosecuting such cases.

In your report you highlight a few threats to media freedom across the OSCE region, and I'd like to just touch upon a couple, if I may. In Russia, respect for freedom of expression, including for the media, continues to erode, and the prevailing conditions of impunity for those who attack journalists embolden more attacks. The United States joins you and your office in condemning the heinous October 23 attack on Tatyana Felgengauer, deputy editor and presenter at Ekho Moskvyy radio station. Although the Prosecutor General's office has pledged a full investigation, Russian state television blamed the victim, claiming the station had provoked the attack and served foreign interests.

The United States welcomes your recent trip to Ukraine. We share the Ukrainian government's concern about the intense state-sponsored hostile propaganda campaign and disinformation campaign waged by Russia in its attempt to divide Ukraine and demonize the Ukrainian government. We continue to encourage the Ukrainian government, and other governments targeted by such reprehensible campaigns, to defend themselves in ways that uphold their obligation to respect freedom of expression, and to focus on improving journalists' safety and maintaining a free and open media, which are essential for the success of their democracies.

In Turkey, hundreds of journalists have been arrested and media outlets shuttered since the July 2016 coup attempt. The United States, and I personally, recognize the grave security challenges that Turkey faces. At the same time, we do not believe these challenges are justification for limiting the freedom of expression, even when the speech is controversial or uncomfortable.

The United States shares the Representative's concerns about constricting space for freedom of expression, including for the media, in Azerbaijan. Politically-motivated charges continue against independent media, and journalists face harassment, physical assault, incarceration, or other efforts to silence them. The United States remains troubled by threats to freedom of expression in Central Asia, where access to information remains highly restricted with significant government control of the media. We welcome Uzbekistan's hosting of the annual OSCE Central Asia Media Conference in Tashkent last month.

Finally, Mr. Chair, we often hear in the Permanent Council a few participating States calling for more "balance" in our Organization. By balance, they often mean that the OSCE should turn a blind eye to problems "east of Vienna" and abandon its work in the Human Dimension. As you continue your important work, we caution you not to be drawn into attempts by some participating States to draw a false equivalency. In our view, the Representative needs to focus its efforts where media freedom is under the greatest threat. Protecting freedom of expression, including that of the media, is a shared and sacred obligation, and a vital, ongoing imperative that must be practiced and valued in every country of the OSCE region.

In closing, we look forward to working with you, other delegations, the Austrian and Italian Chairmanships, the Secretary General, and the leadership of ODIHR and High Commissioner on National Minorities to strengthen these important institutions. The United States will continue to defend their independence, mandates, and budgets.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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