



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Freedom of Expression in Russia

As delivered by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
February 20, 2014

The United States first of all commends the Chairmanship for its focus on freedom of the media in 2014. We similarly continue to support the work of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. The need for efforts in this regard remains compelling, and we call on all participating States to protect the fundamental freedom of expression.

In light of the commitments of the participating States related to freedom of expression I would like to raise some specific concerns with the Russian Federation. In recent months, the Government of the Russian Federation has erected new legal barriers to freedom of expression and has taken action against certain journalists and media outlets in retaliation for the content of their reporting and other journalistic activities. On February 4, President Putin signed a new law that dramatically increases the severity of criminal penalties for “extremism.” Prior to that, on February 1, another law came into force allowing authorities to block websites – without a court order – that express “extremist” views or call for unsanctioned public protest. We have on many occasions objected in this forum to Russia’s overly broad application of anti-extremism laws. These laws have already been used to target journalists and media outlets, NGOs, religious minorities, and the political opposition, in certain cases effectively criminalizing the exercise of freedom of expression.

We call your attention to the recent controversy that has resulted in all major carriers of the independent TV station “Dozhd” (Rain) dropping its broadcasts from their cable packages. Reportedly this is because of a poll the station briefly tried to conduct that asked viewers their opinion about whether Leningrad should have been defended during World War II. Debate on the poll’s content aside, the response appears to be aimed at silencing an independent media source that has reported courageously on corruption and political dissent in Russia. We share the concerns of the Representative on Freedom of Media that this could seriously undermine media pluralism in Russia. We join Ms. Mijatović in urging that this act be reversed.

The law prohibiting so-called LGBT – or gay – propaganda has also been used to target media freedom. On January 31, a court fined Khabarovsk newspaper editor Alexander Sutugin 50,000 rubles for publishing an article about the firing of a gay school teacher for his sexual orientation. This is the first verdict against a journalist or media outlet for violating Russia’s ban on so-called “LGBT propaganda.” The same day, journalist Lena Klimova in Nizhniy Tagil was charged with violating the law for creating a website that functions as a support group for LGBT teens.

Given the Russian Federation's deep concern about children this seems particularly egregious.

As we have said repeatedly, the "LGBT propaganda" law unduly restricts the fundamental freedoms of expression and has put a chill on the freedom of peaceful assembly.

We also urge Russia to rescind the two-year ban on the journalistic activities of Aksana Panova, editor of the independent news portal Ura.ru, who was convicted January 9 in Yekaterinburg in a case that appears to have a political basis. Ura.ru had frequently published critical reports of local and regional government officials.

Mr. Chairman, these are negative developments that are inconsistent with the very commitments to which all participating States have agreed. We must work to ensure respect for the fundamental freedom of expression throughout the OSCE.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.