

**Freedom House, Washington Office
OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2014**

**Warsaw, Poland
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**Working Session 2
Statement on Ongoing Attacks on Freedom of Expression**

Ms. President, Dear Colleagues. Freedom of expression across the OSCE region is under broad stress, with declines registered on Freedom House's Freedom in the Press survey across the OSCE space. Freedom House calls attention to the ongoing attacks on freedom of expression by OSCE Participating States during the past year, and especially the increasingly brazen and draconian steps taken to monitor and control information and expression on the Internet.

Outright blockages of the Internet have unfortunately been frequent throughout the OSCE space. In March, Turkey blocked Twitter and YouTube across the entire country in order to prevent circulation of what it considered to be damaging information about the government; the President of Turkey threatened to "tear Twitter out by the roots." Turkey shares the distinction of blocking entire platforms with Tajikistan, which has repeatedly blocked YouTube and the social network VK, including in June this year. In a sign of the power some Participating States seek over online expression, the Russian government is considering an Internet kill switch which would enable it to cut off millions of Russians to the Internet with the push of a button.

New rules meant to intimidate outspoken and popular bloggers have been passed or introduced in several OSCE Participating States. The new "blogger law" in Russia requires authors of popular blogs to register with the government and submit to additional requirements and restrictions in a clear effort to reign in Russia's vibrant blogosphere. Uzbekistan has also sought to bring bloggers under government control, and in Azerbaijan, alarming physical and online attacks against bloggers and journalists urgently demand the world's action and attention. In Kazakhstan, the penalties for defamation were increased and liability for defamation was extended to statements on social media under the latest revisions to the Criminal Code. The new revisions also made supporting an unauthorized assembly through communications means a criminal offense, which can be used to criminally prosecute a social media user posting about a protest. We are already seeing these kinds of prosecutions in Turkey, where Twitter users are being criminally charged solely for their tweets about the Gezi Park protests and dozens of social media users have been subject to defamation suits from high-ranking government officials including the president.

Freedom of expression has been a casualty on both sides of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Ukrainian officials had sought the authority to close media outlets without court orders, but fortunately that did not pass. Serious consideration of such proposals shows that even countries on a democratic path can have authoritarian tendencies. Laws and policies in Russia have sought to silence people who publicly disagree with Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and overall policy in Ukraine. Restricting expression, with few exceptions, will neither serve to resolve the conflict as quickly as possible nor save lives. It is paramount that both sides take their

commitments to respect the freedom of expression seriously and use only lawful means to regulate the media space.

Censorship and surveillance also threaten fundamental freedoms in the United States and Western Europe, where several governments have failed to adequately investigate or remedy mass surveillance of citizens and non-citizens alike that was first revealed in June 2013. This surveillance has lent authoritarian regimes across the OSCE region a hand in imposing their own widespread surveillance apparatuses, seizing Internet platforms, and draconian censorship online.

The tactics of censorship continue their spread to the Internet before our eyes. It is imperative that efforts to better institutionalize protections for fundamental freedoms online continue, and that OSCE Participating States at the ministerial conference, permanent council, HDIM, and indeed at all opportunities, take concrete steps to protect human rights online and off. To that end, we commend the work of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and her office, and call on Participating States to ensure that this mandate has the resources and authority it needs to swiftly respond to threats to the freedom of expression as they arise. Thank you.