



EUROPEAN UNION

OSCE Permanent Council Nr 1017 Vienna, 18 September 2014

EU Statement on Freedom of Expression in the OSCE Area

Freedom of expression, online and offline, is a key priority for the European Union in the OSCE. Respect for this fundamental right is indispensable for individual dignity and fulfilment, and is an essential foundation for democracy, rule of law, peace and stability. It is, therefore, with deep concern that we witness events and actions in our region that run counter to the commitment we have all made, to each other and to our peoples, to respect, promote and protect this fundamental freedom. We could mention a number of cases, but we would like to highlight a few illustrative ones now.

In the Russian Federation, the space for free expression continues to shrink, stifling a genuine public debate on issues of great consequence for the population, including Russian actions abroad. The blocking of websites frequently without a court order is a practice that clearly violates our OSCE commitments. In recent weeks, we have also seen several violent attacks against journalists who question government policies and actions. We call on the Russian authorities to do everything to ensure that both perpetrators and those ultimately responsible are brought to justice.

Amongst other cases in the Central Asian region, we would like to mention the new amendments to the “law on informatisation” in Uzbekistan introduced on 5 September, which further restrict the enjoyment of the fundamental right to freedom of expression in the country, by imposing restrictions on bloggers that go far beyond the admissible limits to free expression. We join the Representative on Freedom of the Media in decrying these steps by the authorities that will only take the country away from democratic principles.

We once again join the Representative on Freedom of the Media in condemning and calling for an end to attacks on journalists, including killings and abductions of

journalists covering the crisis in eastern Ukraine. We also share the Representative on Freedom of the Media's concern about the ongoing practice and attempts by the de-facto authorities in Crimea to silence critical voices. A recent example is the detention and interrogation of Yelizaveta Bohutskaya, a blogger and contributor to various media outlets. Like the Representative, we call on the de-facto authorities in Crimea to refrain from any activities hindering members of the media in doing their work.

At the same time, we also note the Representative's concern over the recent raid by Ukrainian law enforcement officers on the editorial office of the Vesti newspaper and her call on the Ukrainian authorities to refrain from any measures which could intimidate members of the media.

We welcome the recent visit of the RFoM to Belarus, and encourage Belarus to continue this dialogue in order to overcome the serious challenges that media continue to face in this country.

The European Union will continue to follow these developments, and to place great emphasis on the right to freedom of expression, as well as other fundamental freedoms, in the OSCE. We recognise that few if any participating States including in the European Union have a perfect record when it comes to media freedom. All participating States should look to cooperate with the OSCE RFoM as a means of addressing the serious concerns she raises. We also take this opportunity to invite you all to our HDIM side event on freedom of expression and the internet on Monday at lunchtime, where we will present the EU guidelines on freedom of expression online and offline, and discuss developments in our region.

The Candidate Countries the FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO* and ALBANIA*, ICELAND+, the Country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and Potential Candidate BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA, and the EFTA country NORWAY, member of the European Economic Area, align themselves with this statement.

* The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

+ Iceland continues to be a member of the EFTA and of the European Economic Area.