



United States Mission to the OSCE

Working Session 6 Fundamental Freedoms I: Freedom of expression, free media and information

As prepared for delivery by Ambassador Michael Kozak,
Head of Delegation
OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
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The United States expresses its profound appreciation to Representative on Freedom of the Media Dunja Mijatović for her tireless service to the cause freedom of expression and media freedom throughout the OSCE. Your principled work exemplifies the vigilance and dedication required to preserve an open space for debate and accountability in our societies.

The United States shares your concern that some participating States are broadening their campaigns against press freedom. They fear the proliferation of methods that people everywhere, not just journalists, now possess to express their views and report the news on and off-line.

This fundamental freedom for individuals to seek, receive and impart information of all kinds, is under persistent threat in **Russia**, where authorities use harassment, legal measures, including sweeping “anti-extremism” laws and other forms of intimidation, to instill fear in those who would speak their minds and report their experiences. In December, Russian courts invoked the law to sentence Vadim Tyumentsev, Darya Polyudova, and Oleg Novozhenin to prison for social media posts critical of repressive Russian policies, corruption, and intervention in Ukraine. The new “anti-extremism” laws extend to telecommunications companies and social networks. There are criminal penalties for so-called “extremist” activity, and also for failure to report certain crimes such as “inducing mass disorder.” Russia also imposed burdensome regulations on news aggregator sites that hold them responsible for the credibility of news stories that originate outside of Russia. Russian authorities dangerously foster a climate of impunity for those who attack journalists.

Through its constant campaign of suppression and punitive application of anti-extremism laws in occupied **Crimea**, Russia has created a pervasive climate of fear in which unrestricted media is virtually non-existent. The Russian government in May declared the Tatar legislature an “extremist” organization. A week later a Russian occupation court ordered the legislature’s closure under the same pretext. In the past year, Russian occupation authorities have blocked online news outlets and raided the homes of journalists critical of Russia, citing “extremism.” We call on occupation authorities to release imprisoned Crimean journalist Mykola Semena, who is under house arrest for writing that control of Crimea should be returned to Ukraine. We further call on occupation authorities to allow him to seek needed medical treatment outside the peninsula. In July, Russia published the names of two Crimean journalists and several dozen

activists on a list of alleged “terrorists and extremists.” In separatist-controlled parts of eastern **Ukraine**, many of the same conditions persist: dissenting media are universally suppressed and residents live in fear of speaking openly.

Freedom of expression and media freedoms are generally respected elsewhere in **Ukraine**. We are concerned, however, that recent incidents could affect freedom of expression, particularly the killing of respected journalist Pavel Sheremet. We are also concerned by growing lists of journalists, films, and books banned in Ukraine because the government deems them Russian propaganda. The publication by a private website of the personal data of 5,000 journalists working in separatist-controlled parts of eastern Ukraine has endangered their safety. Many have received death threats.

In **Azerbaijan**, we remain concerned about the shrinking space for independent media. Since the arrest of its financial director in August, the independent newspaper *Azadliq* has been unable to print. While we welcome the release of Khadija Ismayilova, Parviz Hashimli, Hilal Mammadov, and Rauf Mirkadirov and other imprisoned journalists and activists, we urge the government to remove travel restrictions on Ms. Ismayilova, Meydan TV reporters Natig Javadli and Aytan Farhadova, and others. We also urge the government to free without restrictions all journalists and others incarcerated for the exercise of freedom of expression.

In **Tajikistan**, we remain concerned about the use of administrative investigations to pressure journalists. A decree issued last December requires all telecommunication companies and Internet service providers to route their telecommunications through a single government-provided gateway.

We urge the new government in **Uzbekistan** to cease harassing and detaining journalists and human rights advocates. We note that Uktam Pardaev was detained and given a three-year conditional sentence for drawing attention to local corruption and forced labor. We welcomed the release of opposition political activist Murod Juraev after 21 years in jail. We call on Uzbekistan to investigate allegations of mistreatment during his time in prison and ensure his ability to resume his peaceful activism. We reiterate our longstanding call for the release of newspaper editor Muhammad Bekjanov, whose prison term has been extended numerous times, making him by some accounts the longest continuously imprisoned journalist in the world.

We are deeply troubled by **Turkmenistan’s** control over its media. Independent journalists, face great personal risk. Saparmamed Nepeskuliev, a freelance journalist, has been held incommunicado for over a year, convicted on questionable charges of narcotics possession. We join many others in calling on the government to release him.

The United States positively notes **Kyrgyzstan’s** commitment to freedom of expression, including by the media. However, we are concerned about provisions in a draft law that would ban foreigners and foreign organizations from establishing media outlets.

While the media situation in Balkan participating States is not as restrictive as elsewhere in the OSCE region, the negative trend of recent years in **Serbia** and **Macedonia** is

troubling. Investigative journalists often face forms of intimidation. Non-transparent ownership of media outlets and government control of advertising revenues allow government officials to limit media independence and to influence reporting.

Belarus remains one of the most restrictive media environments in the OSCE region, despite the encouraging release of all its political prisoners last year. Freelance journalists are systematically denied accreditation, and independent reporters face fines, harassment, seizures of equipment, and violence, albeit on a slightly lesser scale than in previous years. The government routinely denies accreditation to journalists who work with foreign media. Authorities harass and detain local and foreign journalists. The OSCE/ODIHR observation mission for the parliamentary election in September noted that media coverage did not enable voters to make an informed choice. Despite an overall increase in the number of candidates, the campaign lacked visibility within the public.

I would like to conclude by discussing recent events concerning our ally, **Turkey**. Even before the failed coup attempt, the climate for media freedom in Turkey had deteriorated, illustrated by the government takeover of *Zaman*. The climate has grown dramatically worse since the events of July 15th. To be clear: the United States unequivocally condemns the attempted overthrow of Turkey's democratically elected government. However, the scope of the subsequent crackdown, in which over a hundred media outlets were closed and dozens of journalists detained or indicted is extremely concerning. We believe that a judicial process grounded in the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms will ensure that Turkey's democracy emerges stronger. We note the positive role that social media played in facing down the attempted coup, and urge the government to maintain that critical space for civic participation. It is essential that Turkey provide fair trial guarantees as it proceeds to hold the accused coup plotters accountable.

In establishing the Representative on Freedom of the Media in 1997, the OSCE participating States recognized that "free, independent, and pluralistic media are essential to a free and open society and accountable systems of government." The United States calls on all participating States to resist the temptation to control information as a means to control people. We again thank the Representative for all that she does to monitor a constantly evolving landscape for freedom of expression, on-line and off, and to defend the safety of journalists.