



## **United States Mission to the OSCE**

### **Freedom of Expression Concerns in the OSCE Region**

As delivered by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
March 19, 2015

A free press is an essential foundation for prosperous, open, and secure societies, allowing citizens to access information and to hold their governments accountable. Journalists play a critical role in fulfilling this function, and all participating States should support efforts to ensure their safety. Unfortunately, some journalists in the OSCE region continue to be subject to acts of violence, and impunity for murders and other attacks is all too common. We would also note the communique from the Representative on Freedom of the Media issued February 6 calling particular attention to the threats and intimidation targeting female journalists and bloggers.

The United States would like to thank the Serbian Chairmanship for focusing on the safety and integrity of journalists in its Chairman's Event in Belgrade at the end of the month. We appreciate the importance the Chairmanship places on this topic and its engagement with the office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media to collaborate on this event. We hope the Chairmanship will continue to pay close attention to this issue.

Unfortunately, additional constrictions on media freedom and freedom of expression have been noted in several OSCE participating States over the past few months.

The Russian Federation continues to employ state control over most media outlets. We are also disturbed by Russia's continued intimidation of media NGOs on spurious pretexts which has a chilling effect on freedom of the media. Other laws toughening punishment for vaguely defined "extremism" have been used to unduly restrict the exercise of freedom of expression. We call on the Russian Federation to end the laws and practices that stifle the freedom of expression and diversity of opinion.

As Russia has constricted the exercise of freedom of expression domestically, it has also restricted media freedom in Russia-occupied Crimea. The Russian Federation is responsible for the violations of human rights in Russia-occupied Crimea. The arrests, intimidation, and harassment by the Russian Security Service and de-facto local officials have left the peninsula with virtually no Ukrainian or independent media outlets. We share the concerns outlined in the press release issued by the Representative on the Freedom of the Media's Office on March 5, describing the deteriorating media situation in Crimea and noting, in particular, the censorship of Crimean Tatar media.

We are troubled by expanding threats to the freedom of expression in Central Asia, where governments appear to be cracking down on critical reporting and individual expression,

especially online. OSCE participating States must reverse the trend of backsliding on freedom of expression and media freedom commitments in the region. In Kazakhstan, more progress is needed. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, highly restrictive media environments remain. On a positive note, we welcome the recent conference on digital media held in Astana as a means to support regional cooperation on freedom of expression and access to information.

We remain concerned about the deteriorating situation for civil society in Azerbaijan, including for journalists and media outlets. Recent press releases from the Representative on Freedom of the Media outlined actions taken by the Azerbaijani authorities that appear intended to interfere with independent media and punish critical voices. As of December, local NGOs considered at least 12 journalists and bloggers to be political prisoners or detainees, including well-known journalist Khadija Ismayilova. We urge Azerbaijan to adhere to its commitments and to respect the rights of individuals, including those working for media outlets, to express their views freely and without fear of reprisal.

We urge all participating States to avail themselves of the assistance and expertise of the Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media, and we reiterate our support for her and her mandate. Freedom of expression and a free media are the underpinnings of a strong, democratic society, and we call on all participating States to fulfill their OSCE commitments fully and in good faith.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.