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United States Mission to the OSCE

Ongoing Concerns About Freedom of Expression in Russia

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires, a.i. Harry Kamian
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
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Thank you, Mr. Chair.

During the November 30 Permanent Council, the United States and several other participating States urged the Russian government not to use new media legislation to further restrict freedom of expression and the operation of media outlets in Russia. We called on the Russian government, in implementing this new legislation, to uphold its obligations and commitments to respect freedom of expression, and to support – rather than undermine – the essential work of the media and civil society organizations.

Unfortunately, recent steps taken by Russia have demonstrated its intention to use this new, vague legislation for other reasons. On December 11, the Prosecutor General's office in Russia used new powers under the expanded media legislation to block seven of opposition party Open Russia's online resources. Russia had previously declared Open Russia's UK and U.S.-based branches "undesirable organizations." The new media legislation gave Russian authorities the tools needed to block these websites. On December 13, the Prosecutor General's Office threatened to block Twitter access across Russia, if Twitter did not remove Open Russia's Twitter accounts from Russia's information space. This example clearly demonstrates that Russia intends to use the new legislation not to promote transparency, but for political purposes, and in a manner that is detrimental to freedom of expression.

In addition, the Russian Ministry of Justice named Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, along with seven of its media affiliates, as "foreign agents." To date, the Ministry has not provided any concrete guidelines as to what constitutes compliance with the law or what criteria it uses to identify media outlets as foreign agents. Without such criteria or information regarding compliance, enforcement is subjective, placing the freedom of the media in Russia under further threat of legal penalty.

The United States is likewise concerned about work currently underway in the Russian Duma to amend the administrative code to impose fines for violations of foreign agent media regulations.

In closing, the United States would like to refute Russia's false claim that their new law is about transparency. We do not believe it is so. We believe that it is about control and manipulation. Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty already disclose that they are funded by the U.S. government. We call on Russia to refrain from using the compliance regime, whatever form it ultimately takes, as a political weapon to intimidate or try to shut down these or other media outlets.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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