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United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Regular Report by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Harlem Désir

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires, a.i. Harry Kamian
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
November 22, 2018

The United States warmly welcomes the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM), Mr. Harlem Désir, back to the Permanent Council and expresses our appreciation for his comprehensive report. The Office of the RFoM is an essential institution in ensuring that participating States respect our obligations under international law and our OSCE commitments regarding freedom of expression. We support the RFoM's independence, budget, and mandate, all of which allow the Office to respond quickly to threats against media freedom and to address emerging challenges throughout the OSCE region. The United States also supports the RFoM's work to counter disinformation and to promote freedom of expression offline and online.

We also welcome the active engagement and exchange of views between the RFoM and U.S. authorities on issues raised by the RFoM related to media freedom in the United States. I wish to reassure the RFoM that the United States supports freedom of the media both internationally and domestically. Freedom of speech and of the press are fundamental values embedded in our Constitution's First Amendment. Mr. Chair, we note the RFoM's prioritization of the safety of female journalists online through its Twitter campaign and welcome the upcoming screening of the documentary "A Dark Place," produced by the RFoM and the International Press Institute. The film shares first-hand experiences of female journalists targeted with online violence and harassment. Media freedom is indeed linked to international security. In our view, societies where governments respect the right to freedom of expression are the most peaceful and most able to cooperate with their international neighbors.

In your report, Mr. Désir, you highlight restrictions on media freedom and the threats of violence directed against journalists in the OSCE region. Both domestically and abroad, the Russian Federation seeks to undermine freedom of expression, and independent journalism is increasingly under pressure in Russia. We share the RFoM's concerns over the high fines imposed on *The New Times* for its alleged "violations" of Russia's so-called Foreign Agents law.

We are deeply concerned by the reports of intimidation and death threats directed at *Novaya Gazeta* journalists, who have recently received, among other menacing messages, a funeral

wreath and a severed goat's head. We are also troubled by the November 7 court decision to keep Chechen journalist Zhalaudi Geriyev behind bars on baseless drug charges. We join the RFoM and others in calling for the release of Ukrainian National News Agency journalist Roman Sushchenko and Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov, just two of the more than 70 Ukrainians unjustly imprisoned in occupied Crimea and Russia. We also call on the Russian Federation to secure the release of Stanislav Aseyev, a journalist for Radio Liberty, who has been held captive in the so-called "Donetsk People's Republic" since June 2017.

Mr. Chair, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Turkey has the highest number of detained journalists in the world. The United States shares the RFoM's concerns that laws requiring online broadcasters to apply for a license could be abused to further restrict press freedom. We are troubled by reports that Turkey last week detained academics and civil society activists with ties to the Anatolia Cultural Association. While we recognize the security challenges that Turkey faces, silencing peaceful, critical voices in our view is not the answer.

We urge Turkey to ensure the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, guarantees to a fair trial, and other human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as judicial independence, and to release those held arbitrarily. Mr. Chair, the RFoM's report also notes the serious restrictions on freedom of expression that remain in Azerbaijan, and we call on the government to release all those imprisoned for exercising their human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, such as imprisoned journalists Mehman Huseynov and Afgan Mukhtarli. We also call on the authorities to remove undue Internet restrictions on independent media websites, such as Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty.

Mr. Chair, journalists face considerable risks in carrying out their work, including violence and murder. We remain concerned about the deaths of Jan Kuciak and his fiancé in Slovakia, and Daphne Galizia in Malta. We appreciate the regular updates the delegations of Slovakia and Malta have provided to the Permanent Council regarding the investigations, and we join others in repeating our call for a thorough, transparent, and credible investigation into the circumstances surrounding their deaths.

Mr. Chair, we applaud the RFoM's efforts to keep the safety of journalists among his office's highest priorities, and to keep the issue high on our agenda. Unfortunately, impunity for violence against journalists continues to be a pressing concern in the OSCE region. The United States therefore supports the initiative by the Italian Chairmanship-in-Office to adopt a Decision on the Safety of Journalists in Milan, and we urge all participating States to engage constructively on it.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.