



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
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One of the fundamental commitments of OSCE participating States is to guarantee people are able to exercise the right to freedom of expression. Unfortunately, this commitment is not being honored for many persons within the OSCE community. This right includes the right of the individual to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, whether orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media that person may choose.

It has been eight years since the murder of Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya. While we welcome the June conviction of five people involved in the crime, the mastermind behind the brutal attack remains free. We call upon the Russian Federation to build on this year's convictions and identify and prosecute the person who ordered this terrible crime. The United States also calls on the Russian Federation to bring to justice those who murdered Paul Klebnikov, Timur Kuashev, Akhmednabi Akhmednabiyev, Kazbek Gekkiyev, and several other journalists in the North Caucasus. Impunity for crimes targeting journalists should not be tolerated.

President Putin recently signed into effect amendments to the Law on Mass Media which would reduce the limit on foreign ownership of media outlets from 50% to 20%. This new law is likely to further constrict the media landscape in the Russian Federation that is already dominated by a small group of media elites closely tied to the government.

The space for civil society and freedom of expression is also dramatically shrinking in Azerbaijan. We continue to see increased pressure being placed on NGO activists and journalists from Azerbaijan, some of whom spoke to many of us recently at the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw. The United States is paying close attention to the treatment of journalists in Azerbaijan, and we urge Azerbaijan to adhere to its commitments and to allow its citizens to express their views freely without fear of reprisal. We also call on Azerbaijan to bring to justice those responsible for the murders of Elmar Huseynov and Rafiq Tagi.

On a personal note I'd like to add here that one of the journalists from Azerbaijan that I had met with at the HDIM was Khadija Ismayilova, and I was supposed to see Khadija again at a conference in Prague in memory of Vaclav Havel earlier this week, but unfortunately she was unable to participate in her panel at that conference because she was prevented by the government of Azerbaijan from leaving the country. I said on Twitter what I'll say again here: nothing that Khadija could have said at that conference would have made Azerbaijan

look as silly as preventing her from attending it. Khadija has written at length about good governance and concerns about corruption in Azerbaijan, and as such she should be seen as a source of strength for the country; somebody who is contributing to good governance. The government should not be punishing her for her work.

The United States commends the partial annulment of a law tightening state authority over the Internet in Turkey. In a recent verdict, Turkey's Constitutional Court ruled that the Telecommunications Directorate's decision to close websites without a court order was unconstitutional. We continue to urge the government of Turkey to uphold freedom of expression on the Internet and via social media.

Finally, the United States endorses the efforts of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media to bring attention to the problem of limiting freedom of expression while countering extremism in a recent communiqué. When OSCE participating States respond to threats from extremists with undue censorship, or when they opportunistically misuse "extremism" as an attempted excuse for repression, everyone loses. We agree with the Representative on Freedom of the Media's October 7 communiqué, which pointed out that vaguely worded anti-extremism laws pose dangers, and urged that any anti-extremism laws be in accordance with international legal obligations.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.