



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Report by Representative on Freedom of the Media Dunja Mijatović

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
June 23, 2011

The United States warmly welcomes you back to the Permanent Council today, Representative Mijatovic. We thank you for your detailed report, evidence of your tireless dedication to advancing the cause of media freedom throughout the OSCE region. You and your staff tirelessly promote best practices, conduct valuable training exercises, and provide excellent technical advice that serves as guideposts for participating States to fulfill their commitments to media freedom.

We are pleased by the several instances of governments cooperating with your office to discuss, investigate, and address worrisome trends and policies affecting media freedom. However, your report also highlights continuing threats to media freedom within the OSCE region.

The most troubling trend continues to be violence against journalists. We continue to hear reports of violent assaults and threats of violence against journalists in the OSCE region. All too often, cases of violence against journalists go unresolved. We welcome the news from Russia of important advances in the separate murder cases of Anastasia Baburova and Anna Politkovskaya, and urge the Russian Federation to continue to address the problem of impunity for those who attack journalists. In this regard, we hope the recommendations from the Conference on Safety of Journalists, coupled with the pending catalogue of best practices, will aid all participating States in creating a safer environment for journalists. As noted by U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Melia there, "Governments bear the fundamental responsibility to ensure that journalists are free to practice their professions without interference or reprisal...and to combat violence against journalists from any quarter."

Another troubling trend in the OSCE region is the continuing use of legal mechanisms such as tax codes, registration requirements, criminal defamation laws, and other legal or administrative obstacles on free speech in order to prosecute journalists for their work, or to punish or intimidate those with whom a government may disagree. The United States joins with you in calling for the release of all journalists imprisoned for simply exercising their right to freedom of expression. We are also disturbed by government efforts to shut down independent media outlets through law suits, disproportionate fines, confiscation of materials, and closure of printing houses.

We particularly welcome your efforts to ensure freedom of expression and association on the Internet, which is becoming an increasingly important platform for the full exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the 21st century.

In Kyrgyzstan, which has taken measures in the past year to increase media freedom, Parliament last week adopted a resolution calling for an independent news site to be blocked

on the basis that it incites ethnic hatred. In fact, what will help foster ethnic reconciliation is greater availability of information, not less. Fortunately, a wide range of influential voices inside and outside governmental institutions in Kyrgyzstan have spoken out publicly against possible censorship of the media. We are glad to see that Representative Mijatovic added her voice as well.

With respect to media freedom in Tajikistan, we join you in welcoming the decision of three judges to drop their lawsuits against three independent papers. However, we are seriously concerned about the detention of and denial of counsel to BBC journalist Urunboi Usmonov who, after reporting on the arrests of religious extremists, is now imprisoned on charges of extremism. The criminal case against Asht District journalist Makhmadusuf Ismoilov, who has been jailed since October 23, 2010, goes on. Mr. Ismoilov was arrested after publishing reports alleging local government corruption. We note the lack of progress in the investigation into the violent assault on Hikmatullo Saifullozoda on February 7. We also find it troubling that the Justice Ministry forced independent newspaper Paykon to close on May 6. A high ranking Ministry of Interior official's lawsuit against Asia Plus newspaper remains open.

We again note that your report makes no mention of Turkmenistan or recent reports that individuals associated with RFE/RL have been the targets of intimidation by Turkmen government agents apparently because of their work as, or relationship to, journalists. As we said previously, this lack of mention should not be perceived as a positive indication, but rather a reflection of the nearly complete lack of media freedom in Turkmenistan. We call upon the government of Turkmenistan to engage with your office and to take immediate steps to uphold its OSCE commitments on media freedom.

Finally, we share your concerns over the critical state of media freedom in Belarus, and call on authorities there to end the harassment of independent journalists and to take seriously its OSCE commitments.

Thank you again, Representative Mijatovic. We applaud the dedicated work of you and your staff in advancing media freedom within the OSCE. You can count our full support as you continue this critical work.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.