



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

### **Fundamental Freedoms in Russia**

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires, a.i. Kate M. Byrnes  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
March 17, 2016

The United States remains concerned about growing intolerance of dissent and independent voices in the Russian Federation, including increasing restrictions imposed on civil society by the Russian government.

The United States is deeply troubled by the Russian Government's March 10 decision to designate the National Democratic Institute (NDI) as a so-called "undesirable" foreign organization. We note with particular regret that the "undesirable foreign organization" list is comprised exclusively of American non-governmental organizations. NDI is the fifth organization on the list, joining the National Endowment for Democracy, Open Society Foundation, the Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation, and the U.S.-Russia Foundation.

By restricting the work of civil society in Russia, the so-called "undesirables" law encroaches on the right to freedom of association. According to this law, organizations found to be undesirable are banned and individuals working with them could face criminal penalties. We reject the notion that NDI and other international civil society organizations are a threat to Russia. NDI promotes openness and accountability in government, principles Russia should embrace, not exclude or muzzle. We are interested to hear an explanation of what specific threats the Russian government believes NDI poses.

We strongly condemn the March 9 attack on a bus carrying activists and journalists who were on a trip organized by the Committee Against Torture to report on human rights abuses in Chechnya and Ingushetia. We also note reports that the offices in Ingushetia of the Committee Against Torture were broken into. Such acts of intimidation have a chilling effect on freedom of expression and may encourage additional violence. Last month, we raised concern about threats made by Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen Republic of the Russian Federation, against members of the political opposition, and warned that this too would have a chilling effect on the exercise of freedom of expression in Russia, if not also to serve as a direct call for violence.

Colleagues, it was 25 years ago in Moscow when OSCE participating States recognized that "the active involvement of persons, groups, organizations and institutions is essential to ensure continuing progress..." in fulfilling all of their human dimension commitments. More recently in Astana, we agreed that "we value the important role played by civil society and

free media in helping us to ensure full respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, including free and fair elections, and the rule of law.”

In addition to these recent developments affecting civil society in Russia, the United States is also deeply concerned over reports that Russia may close the Moscow office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights. Such a move would be yet another disturbing example of the growing crackdown on independent voices and a deliberate step to isolate the Russian people further from the world.

In closing we once again call on the Government of Russia to uphold its international obligations and OSCE commitments to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.