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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on World Press Freedom Day

As delivered by Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Gregory Macris
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
May 2, 2019

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Tomorrow marks the 26th anniversary of World Press Freedom Day. The value the United States places on freedom of the press cannot be overstated. In fact, it was included in the First Amendment of our Constitution some 230 years ago. Ensuring freedom of expression, including press freedom, is an essential pillar of democracy, and by fostering a free press, people are empowered to inform themselves and hold their governments accountable.

The United States welcomes this year's global theme for World Press Freedom Day: *Media for Democracy: Journalism and Elections in Times of Disinformation*. The United States remains committed to countering disinformation and other forms of malign influence that some foreign governments and other actors use to manipulate and undermine democratic systems and elections processes. We promote media literacy and critical thinking in order to help media consumers distinguish facts and information from propaganda and disinformation, and to build resilience against malign influence operations.

Today we honor the many journalists and media actors who have dedicated their lives, often at great risk, to keeping the public informed. Journalists around the world are persecuted, targeted with violence, or even killed – all too often with impunity. We join the British and Irish governments in condemning the April 18 killing in Northern Ireland of journalist Lyra McKee, on assignment observing the riots there.

We support the mandate and independence of the Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media. We share the concerns expressed by the RFoM on the passage of restrictive media laws by Russia. Two new measures are particularly troubling. One prohibits expressions of “disrespect” towards the Russian state, Russian society, state symbols, the constitution, or government officials. The second is a ban on so-called “fake news” that criminalizes the online dissemination of information the government deems “untrue.” Under the new law, the government can block an entire website if its owner does not immediately delete the offending information. These are the latest restrictive measures that the Russian government has taken to intimidate and control the press. We also echo the RFoM's condemnation of the continued deterioration of freedom of expression and safety of journalists in Crimea, which has resulted from Russia's occupation of the peninsula.

A free and independent media is indispensable to a vibrant, functioning democracy. The United States welcomes the Ministerial decision on the *Safety of Journalists* adopted in Milan, and we remain committed to its full implementation. We honor those who have dedicated and even sacrificed their lives to sustaining democracy through journalism, and reiterate our calls for all participating States to uphold their international law obligations and OSCE commitments on freedom of expression.

My Russian counterpart, a few moments ago, mentioned the deadly shooting, June 28th 2018 at the Capital Gazette Newspaper in Annapolis, Maryland -- just east of Washington, D.C. President Trump, the next day, speaking very, very emotionally said that the shooting shocked the conscience of our nation, and filled our hearts with grief. Journalists, like all Americans, should be free from the fear of being violently attacked while doing their job. To update, in reaction to this incident of violence against the media, the shooter was immediately taken into custody to face 23 criminal indictments, including five counts of murder. He is awaiting trial.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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