



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on World Press Freedom Day and Violations of Media Freedom Commitments by the Russian Federation

As delivered by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
May 8, 2014

On May 3, the world marked World Press Freedom Day, designated by UNESCO in 1997 to raise awareness of the duty of governments to uphold and protect the fundamental freedom of expression. In the United States, freedom of speech and the press are enshrined in our Bill of Rights, demonstrating the value that Americans place on freedom of expression and on a dynamic media environment. Unfortunately, as Secretary Kerry pointed out, “for too many, a free press is under assault, and the journalists, bloggers, photographers, essayists, and satirists who give life to the words ‘free press’ are in danger.”

The United States is deeply troubled by new laws that impose sweeping restrictions on the Internet and blogging in Russia. Reporters Without Borders has described the laws as an attempt to increase state control of online content. OSCE Representative for Freedom of the Media Dunja Mijatovic has been strongly critical of the measures, which she said “curb freedom of expression and freedom of social media, as well as seriously inhibit the right of citizens to freely receive and disseminate alternative information and express critical views.” These new restrictions can only be seen for what they are – an attempt by the Russian government to limit freedom of expression and the ability to network and assemble. Indeed, the new restrictions limit the exercise of human rights of all Russians, not just journalists.

These are just the latest efforts by the Russian government to exert control over the rapidly shrinking space for independent voices in Russia both online and off-line. The leading Russian social media site, VKontakte, was taken over by businessmen closely linked to the Kremlin. VKontakte founder Pavel Durov, who reportedly resisted the demands of the Federal Security Service for information on political activists for several months, has now fled the country. This incident follows the Kremlin-instigated leadership changes at Lenta.ru, RIA-Novosti, and other media outlets where senior officials were replaced with pro-Kremlin officials, and decisions by the Russian government to block individual independent websites and blogs. Laws passed in 2012 and 2013 that targeted websites, supposedly for reasons of fighting child pornography and “extremism,” are being used as pretexts for increased involvement by the Russian government in controlling the Internet.

President Putin recently reiterated his desire for replacing the globally interconnected Internet – the public square of the 21st century – with a system routing traffic through servers in individual countries, enabling ever-greater government control of information and opinion. Secretary Kerry provided the U.S. response at last week’s Freedom Online Coalition meeting in Tallinn: “We believe in an open and inclusive Internet with input from all and equal access to all. And we believe in giving people a voice from the bottom up. The

authoritarian vision sees a free, open, inclusive Internet as a threat to state power. [These states] use their power to threaten the Internet, and it's about controlling information and access to it from the top down.”

Russia's disregard for OSCE commitments to the fundamental freedom of expression and other fundamental freedoms has also been extended to parts of Ukraine by Russian forces and the pro-Russia militants it supports. In Russian-occupied Crimea, attacks on media freedom commenced with the Russian incursion. In March, media freedom groups documented dozens of attacks on and abductions of reporters in Crimea by so-called “Self-Defense Groups.” The Crimean Center for Investigative Journalism was occupied by armed gunmen, and Ukrainian television stations were seized and reopened as Russian stations. OSCE Media Freedom Representative Mijatovic, who visited Crimea, described media freedom there as “under siege.” In April, the Ukrainian Russian-language newspaper “Vesti” was forced to close its bureaus in Simferopol and Sevastopol.

Russia also bears much of the responsibility for the increasingly hazardous media freedom situation in eastern Ukraine. The Committee to Protect Journalists has reported multiple recent attacks against and kidnappings of journalists traveling to the area to cover the unrest, as well as attacks on media outlets. Representative Mijatovic, in her press releases of April 24 and 29, condemned attacks on journalists in the area, the occupation of the broadcasting center in Donetsk, and the replacement of the local Ukrainian channel with a Russian one. An American journalist with Vice News, who was kidnapped and beaten by pro-Russia militants over a three-day period, recently described the harrowing details of his captivity; he considers himself lucky to have been released while Ukrainian journalists like Sergei Lefter, Irma Krat, and two others remain in captivity.

Mr. Chairman, the United States calls upon the Russian Federation to abide by its OSCE commitments to freedom of expression and free media as well as the commitments it made in the April 17 Geneva statement. The Russian government must take immediate steps to de-escalate tensions in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine and make clear to its own troops and local militants that attacks on journalists and media outlets are completely unacceptable and must be stopped.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.