



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on the State of Media Freedom in the OSCE area

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires Carol Fuller
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
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Thank you, Mr. Chair.

On numerous occasions, the United States has taken the floor to address serious and specific concerns regarding media freedom in various OSCE countries.

In his speech in Oslo to accept the Nobel Peace Prize, President Obama said we need to build a world where peace rests on the inherent rights and dignities of every individual. Our earliest OSCE commitments set forth this same principle, as do a host of Ministerial Decisions and Summit Declarations on media freedom, freedom of expression, and the safety of journalists that we have collectively passed – of our own volition, by our own choice, and through our own doing – in the years since the Final Act in Helsinki in 1975.

Sadly, today, we again take the floor, not to address the wrongs done to an individual journalist or a penalty imposed upon a single media outlet, but rather to draw our collective attention to the grave threats gathering in the OSCE area – and, as a consequence, to this organization – from increased perils faced daily by individual journalists and others exercising their universal right to freedom of expression, which range from violence perpetrated against them with impunity, to the all too frequent criminalization of speech, and from overly harsh prison sentences or outrageously punitive fines on media outlets, to outright government hostility towards the exercise of freedom of speech and efforts to censor opinions that are not shared by government bureaucrats – a long list.

Many respected international organizations, including Freedom House, Reporters without Borders, and others, have warned of the backsliding we have witnessed in the last 10 years in media freedom in the OSCE region. Twenty-two of our participating States are currently ranked as either Partly Free or Not Free by Freedom House. Sadly, many citizens in participating States have become inured to the unceasing litany of brutalities and other pressures faced by journalists. We have become accustomed to reports that a media outlet has been fined millions of Euros for remarks perceived as insulting by a government – indeed, by more than one government seated at this table. Selective or harsh application of bureaucratic procedures and tax investigations, and the sometimes crippling fines that result, threaten the sustainability of independent or opposition media outlets. The utter lack of results from most of the investigations into violence against journalists has become the default response of governments determined to manage and control access to information by their own citizens in print, on television, or via the Internet.

In her recent speech on Internet freedom, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke of an “urgent need” to protect freedom of expression, including the digital frontier of the 21st

century, and called the “freedom to connect” to global information networks an “on-ramp to modernity.” As we witness the transformation of the media toward new technologies such as Facebook, Twitter, and text messaging, some governments have seized chances to control these methods under the pretext of national security.

Another worrisome development is the increasing lack of pluralism in media ownership that exists in some parts of the OSCE. When the vast majority of public information – be it in print or broadcast media – passes through just a few individual gateways, controlled either by governments or by private firms that hew a government line, the result is a media environment tending toward canned messaging and propaganda that falls short of our democratic aspirations and principles.

As we said at the Permanent Council meeting on October 29, 2009, we remain disturbed that the numbers of civil lawsuits and criminal charges being brought against journalists on trumped-up charges of violating state secrets, defamation, hooliganism, or “moral damages” has increased substantially in some participating States who seek to use the law as a way to control or intimidate the media.

Among the most distressing trends is the physical danger faced by increasing numbers of journalists that often goes unchecked. In one OSCE country, 19 journalists have been killed since the year 2000, with only two convictions resulting in these cases. In one Central Asian country, last year alone, more than eight journalists were violently assaulted and two were murdered. In both countries, as in too many other OSCE participating States, inadequate responses by the governments and poor investigations promulgate an attitude of impunity and provide encouragement to others to opt for violence against journalists who threaten to expose their activities.

We are pleased that two OSCE countries, in keeping with their OSCE commitments, have recently opted to decriminalize speech. Even though their laws had not been used for a considerable period of time, the decision to remove them from the books is an example of adhering to both the spirit and the letter of our common commitments.

In the spirit that brought us inspiringly close to a decision on media freedom in Athens, we urge all participating States, and particularly those who were unable to join consensus on that decision, to commit anew this year to respect the right of our citizens to receive and impart information freely and without undue governmental interference.

In that same spirit, and as we move forward with the cross-dimensional Corfu Process throughout the coming year, we urge our fellow participating States to engage creatively in finding new mechanisms to strengthen the OSCE’s role in guarding media freedom and promoting full implementation of OSCE commitments in this area.

Mr. Chairman, in conclusion, I am aware that it is unusual to address the Permanent Council in this manner. But we must not let the extraordinary dangers confronting the media in too many participating States become routine. This is our obligation as an institution, and especially here in Current Issues. The United States calls upon all OSCE participating States to give deep and serious consideration to the commitments we have undertaken; to recognize that until there is true freedom of expression, there can be no true and lasting security.

Thank you Mister Chairman.