



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Dunja Mijatović

As delivered by Chargé d’Affaires Kate Byrnes
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
November 27, 2014

The United States warmly welcomes OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Dunja Mijatović to the Permanent Council. Thank you for your comprehensive report. As you noted, journalists in the OSCE region continue to be subject to acts of violence, and we’ve seen that impunity for murders and other attacks is all too common. In addition, we share your concern about efforts to place increased limits and restrictions on independent media outlets within the OSCE region.

Representative Mijatović, you and your team play an invaluable role in defending journalists and free media and in contributing to comprehensive security across the OSCE. As you call attention to challenges facing all participating States, your impartiality in holding all participating States accountable to our commitments and your diligent execution of your mandate have set an example. We urge all participating States in the region to avail themselves of your assistance and expertise in addressing shortfalls in upholding their and our commitments.

We appreciate the role you have played in providing expertise and facilitating dialogue between journalists, civil society and the Ukrainian government. We commend the Ukrainian government for continuing to provide for the safety of journalists in the territory under its control as Ukraine defends its sovereignty and territorial integrity. We appreciate your thorough monitoring of the increasingly restrictive media environment in Crimea and the separatist-controlled areas of eastern Ukraine. Your condemnation of intimidation, kidnappings, disappearances, and other attacks on journalists has been strong and consistent, and should be heeded by all participating States. Russia-backed separatists and Russia’s occupation authorities have also limited freedom of expression, including by the media, in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and in occupied Crimea, which has been left with virtually no Ukrainian or independent media outlets.

The exercise of the freedom of expression is also constricted in the Russian Federation. In Russia, where the majority of people get their news from broadcast television, the Russian government or Kremlin-friendly oligarchs control all national television stations. At the same time, Russia has imposed sweeping new Internet access restrictions. Having broadened the grounds on which authorities can block websites without a court order, Russian authorities have denied the public access to major independent news outlets and influential blogs. Russian authorities have also used other new laws against “extremism” to restrict the exercise of freedom of expression.

We deplore the deteriorating situation for civil society in Azerbaijan, notably for journalists and media outlets. Your report cites actions taken by Azerbaijani authorities over the past six months that appear intended to interfere with independent media and punish critical voices. We urge Azerbaijan to adhere to its commitments and to allow its citizens to express their views freely without fear of reprisal.

We also remain seriously concerned about freedom of expression in Belarus, although we note some small positive developments in your report. Representative Mijatović, your report cites no current cases of journalists held in jail, and fewer short-term detentions of media representatives in the past few months. However, we continue to see a worrying trend in which journalists who are simply doing their job by reporting on events are being tried for violating the law on public gatherings. We echo your call on the Belarusian government to adhere to its OSCE commitments to respect freedom of expression and fully utilize the RFoM Office as a means of support towards that goal.

Representative Mijatović, the United States also notes with concern the rising frequency of attacks on and physical threats to the media in the Balkans. The United States calls on all participating States to fully investigate and prosecute those who seek to commit violence and other crimes targeted at members of the media or support cyberattacks against media institutions, as we have seen impunity against these crimes only serves to encourage further perpetrators. We hope that the upcoming Serbian chairmanship will set an example by addressing concerns about media freedom.

We are troubled by growing threats to the freedom of expression in Central Asia, where governments appear to be cracking down on critical reporting and freedom of expression, particularly online. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, highly restrictive media environments remain, and laws enabling government control continue to tighten. In Tajikistan, authorities continued to periodically block access to independent websites and file defamations suits against, or otherwise intimidate, critical journalists. And in Turkmenistan, the information blackout is near-total for those who wish to express their opinion, become informed about current events, or report on conditions in their country.

Representative Mijatović, we appreciate your efforts to give concrete recommendations to participating States through your Open Journalism program in defining and framing the challenges of new media regulations while upholding government obligations to protect freedom of expression online and offline. In addition, we also welcome the opportunity to call attention to your ongoing efforts to supporting regional journalism training, which we have supported financially.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.