



**United States Mission to the OSCE**  
**Response to Regular Report by OSCE  
Representative on Freedom of the Media  
Harlem Désir**

As delivered by Ambassador James S. Gilmore III  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
November 21, 2019

The United States welcomes the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM) Harlem Désir. I've had some interactions with him extensively over the past several weeks and I'm looking forward to continuing that relationship. We appreciate your work and your team's work in responding quickly and effectively to the urgent concerns that are being expressed here today and the emerging challenges to the freedom of the media.

Freedom of expression and a free media are U.S. values embodied in the First Amendment of our Constitution – inscribed nearly 230 years ago. Freedom of expression and media freedom are linked to international security also. Countries in which the government respects the right to freedom of expression, including press freedom, are the most democratic and accountable to the citizens. Free media can provide a check on authoritarian governments and authoritarian states, which is the essence of the American constitution.

In your report, you highlight specific threats.

We share your concern about the impact of Russian repression on the exercise of freedom of expression in Ukraine, specifically the dire situation for freedom of expression, including press freedom, in Crimea and in the Russia-controlled territories in eastern Ukraine. We echo your call on Russia to release Crimean Tatar blogger Nariman Memedeminov who was sentenced in October to two and a half years in prison on dubious charges of “publicly calling for terrorism activities.” Representative Désir correctly noted reports from various human rights institutions that clearly indicated Memedeminov's videos contained no calls or references to terrorism, violent extremism or violence. We join Mr. Désir and others in urging the immediate release of Ukrainian journalist Stanislav Aseyev who was sentenced on October 22 to 15 years imprisonment on spurious charges of so-called extremism and espionage – here's the height of hypocrisy – questioning the territorial integrity of the sham statelet created by the Kremlin and unilaterally dubbed the “Donetsk People's Republic.”

In Russia, we note our deep concern over expansion of the legislative framework to target individuals who express dissent on the internet, including laws passed this year to ban the spread and the expressions of what authorities deem to be “disrespectful” to state officials.

The troubling new “sovereign internet” law, which took effect on November 1, allows for greater surveillance by intelligence agencies and increases the ability of state authorities to control information and block content to close out free information to Russian citizens. This requires our organization to give close scrutiny in ongoing days. We also share Representative Désir’s concern about Russia’s decision to charge Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) journalist Svetlana Prokopyeva with “justifying terrorism,” shall we say, for her remarks condemning repression by the state. We echo Mr. Désir’s call for a complete dropping of criminal charges against her. This case is only one example of how anti-terrorism legislation is being used to curb freedom of expression in Russia and should be a warning to other countries across OSCE of the use of this kind of device.

We share Mr. Desir’s concerns about the ongoing campaign against independent Dagestani newspaper Chernovik, including the heavy-handed October 2 raid by armed and masked security officers on its headquarters in connection with the ongoing terrorism investigation of one of its journalists. Abdulmumin Gadzhiev was arrested in June, faces up to a life sentence, and is considered by the respected non-governmental organization Memorial to be a political prisoner. Reporters Without Borders recently noted the “glaring absence of real evidence” in the case against him. We call for his immediate release. While we recommend and while we welcome the diversity of voices that were heard at the Moscow conference in November, we note that many of these independent voices were not widely broadcast in the state-controlled Russian-language media. The appearance of the OSCE Representative [on Freedom of the Media] in Moscow creates the danger of a propaganda victory – to suggest that the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media endorses the Russian media way of doing things in Moscow and in Russia, which I believe you do not. Perhaps you might like to write a report and compare the attacks that were made today on actual countries with actual free media, like the United States and the European Union. Perhaps you would like to do a comparison of the approach of the media in those countries.

With respect to our friends the Turks and Turkey, freedom of the press is at risk in Turkey and I welcome the comment of our friend who spoke here today, particularly with respect to the changes that are being made in the amendments that are being offered. But we have to recognize that Turkey has the highest number of detained journalists in the world – with some 150 journalists currently in detention and pre-trial detention, and more than 150 media outlets closed since 2016. We agree that more needs to be done for a safe working environment for journalists, and the trend of physical attacks and motivated prosecutions to intimidate them must stop. We note Mr. Désir’s public statement and characterization of the re-arrest of journalist Ahmet Altan as “a terrible setback,” with the potential for deepening the media freedom crisis in Turkey. We remain concerned about these actions the government has taken that limit the number of voices and diversity, including the blocking of 136 news sites and social media accounts in August, which to this country is puzzling, for a country with past commitments to liberty and freedom.

The United States notes the alarming trend of violations against freedom of expression across the OSCE region where journalists are punished for reporting on demonstrations and public protests. We are alarmed by the detention of Voice of America’s Azerbaijani Service correspondent Taptiy Guliyev (Farhadoglou) for covering a protest in Baku. We deplore the physical attacks against journalists and the obstruction of media activities during election-related demonstrations July 27 and August 3 in Moscow. To do their jobs,

journalists must be able to cover public events without intimidation or detention, at least in an organization that purports to support freedom of the press like the OSCE.

We renew our call that the government of Tajikistan immediately accredit all journalists from Radio Ozodi and stop using accreditation as a work permit or a tool to control content. We call on Uzbek authorities to thoroughly investigate the death of Davlat Nazar, who local officials harassed for his critical reporting. We urge Kyrgyz authorities to protect Azattyk journalists and other independent journalists from retaliation for their investigative reporting, particularly their coverage of alleged corruption. We welcome the focus of Kazakhstan's statement here today with respect to the safety of journalists and we applaud the increasing contacts and openness of the representatives here from Central Asia. And these issues have to be ongoing discussions in renewed contacts that we're seeing through OSCE.

We commend the Representative's continued work to expose threats, abuse, harassment, and violence against journalists and other media actors, as well as on the cases of imprisonment of journalists who were jailed for their journalistic work. We join the Representative in calling for the release of all journalists detained or imprisoned in connection with their work.

In this context, we fully support ongoing efforts by the Representative to ensure the Milan 2018 Ministerial Decision on the Safety of Journalists – a decision the Italian Chairmanship was instrumental in putting forward to OSCE participating States – is fully implemented. All OSCE participating States bear the responsibility to make use of this decision to update and strengthen OSCE commitments for the safety of journalists. I remind our fellow Representatives here today that the final act in the Helsinki Accords is based upon the knowledge and freedom of information, the openness of information which adds to democracy and the freedom of the minds of people – and that is why you exist Mr. Désir and we're grateful for your work.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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