



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Representative on Freedom of the Media

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
July 13, 2006

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It is always a great pleasure to welcome the Representative on Freedom of the Media back to the Permanent Council. Mr. Haraszti, on the behalf of the United States, thank you for your detailed report and for the work done by your office over the past five months.

Mr. Haraszti, your report and its variety of listed projects reflect the breadth of your work and the energy you put into it. Yet in spite of your efforts and those of your staff, the OSCE community continues to witness destructive and interruptive hindrances, arrest and murder of journalists. Media freedom and independence are fundamental to democratic societies. Yet, it appears that some participating States continue to enact and enforce laws that restrict media freedom, jail journalists and punish media outlets with extraordinarily high fines for seemingly artificially created offenses. Governments that take such measures under the guise of maintaining high reporting standards or upholding the rule of law demonstrate a failure to commitments to media freedom.

We have noted previously and repeatedly that in some participating States, media violations increase dramatically during election campaigns. The detention of journalists just doing their job or closure of media outlets not only raises questions about the fairness of such election campaigns, but also further mars that country's human rights record.

As we noted here two weeks ago, we share Mr. Haraszti's concern over Kazakhstan's new media law. We regret that President Nazarbayev has signed the new media legislation into law. As we said before, this new law appears to be a step backward for Kazakhstan.

Journalists also often remain in physical danger, as exemplified by the four murdered Russian journalists mentioned in Mr. Haraszti's report. We share his expectation that the authorities will act swiftly and openly to resolve these cases and bring those responsible to justice.

Thanks to Mr. Haraszti's continued and focused work to have the libel, defamation, and verbal insult provisions removed from the criminal codes of participating States, we see some improvement throughout the OSCE community. However, several OSCE countries still have restrictive libel laws. Such provisions continue to be abused by some governments to stifle media freedom, so we support Mr. Haraszti's efforts to remove them.

We call on all participating States to increase efforts to ensure the implementation of the helpful recommendations from the OSCE Freedom of Media office. Doing so is a demonstration of a country's commitment to media freedom.

Mr. Haraszti's work with other OSCE institutions, especially with ODIHR, and beyond the OSCE, such as with the Council of Europe and the EU, is commendable. We support these efforts to work with like-minded NGOs, such as the International Research and Exchange Board (IREX) and the Moscow-based Center of Journalism in Extreme Situations, and also support making his office a focal point for all organizations that deal with media freedom. These NGOs, and the OSCE itself, should benefit from such enhanced cooperation.

As we have done every year, the United States will continue its extra-budgetary contribution for the two media conferences this year. These conferences have proven very useful and serve in particular as important fora for Central Asian and South Caucasus journalists.

We look forward to the Supplemental Human Dimension Meeting on Freedom of the Media, which begins today. We expect an open and thorough discussion of many of the issues addressed here in this session. And we would like to have further discussions with you about your request for extra positions.

We have affirmed repeatedly that, "freedom of expression is a fundamental and internationally recognized human right and a basic component of a democratic society and that free, independent and pluralistic media are essential to a free and open society and to an accountable system of government." Again, we commend Mr. Haraszti for his efforts to ensure that these sentiments are upheld across the entire OSCE community.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.