



United States Mission to the OSCE

On World Press Freedom Day

As delivered by Chargé d’Affaires Courtney Austrian
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
May 4, 2023

Today we mark the 30th anniversary of the establishment of World Press Freedom Day. As we reflect on the importance of this day, the United States renews our commitment to promoting and protecting a free press, an essential pillar of democracy. We call on our fellow participating States to uphold their OSCE commitments on freedom of expression and media freedom, both online and offline.

Since February 24th, 2022, the Kremlin has unintentionally and dramatically highlighted the need for press freedom. The Putin regime has criminalized telling the truth about its war of aggression against Ukraine and imprisoned anyone it deems a threat to its lies. It has disregarded its OSCE commitments again and again. Russian citizens are routinely jailed or fined for reporting basic facts or daring to share any opinion that differs from the Kremlin’s narrative. Dozens of media outlets and more than 100 individual journalists and other media professionals have been labeled as “undesirable organizations” or “foreign agents” just for doing their jobs.

The most recent example of the Kremlin’s calculated attack on media freedom is the arrest of Evan Gershkovich, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter wrongfully detained in Russia. Journalism is not a crime. And yet, the Kremlin continues to suppress independent voices throughout Russia. Evan is an example of the strength and bravery of journalists and media workers globally who help citizens understand what is happening at home and in the world. As his colleague Matthew Luxmoore said, “[Evan] understood how dangerous it is. But he did feel it was very, very important to keep going back there, to keep covering that story at a time when very, very few journalists have the talent, the language skills and also the necessary documents to keep going back there.”

Unfortunately, Russia is not the only country incarcerating journalists for doing their jobs. Among the nearly 1500 political prisoners held by the Lukashenka regime in Belarus, the Belarusian Association of Journalists estimates 36 are media workers. One of the most prominent is Ihar Losik who is now serving a 15-year sentence in a maximum-security prison on politically motivated charges. The assault on freedom of expression and press freedom does not stop there. Earlier this year, his wife Darya Losik was sentenced to two years imprisonment for allegedly “facilitating extremism” when she gave an interview about her husband to an independent media outlet. The Lukashenka regime has forced the closure of all major independent media outlets in Belarus, and the Belarusian people are deprived of unfettered access to information that is free of Lukashenka’s and the Kremlin’s propaganda and disinformation.

Without free, independent media, people cannot make informed decisions or hold leaders accountable. To quote the Representative on Freedom of the Media, “democracy and media freedom are too precious to be allowed to wither away. It is our shared responsibility to turn our political commitments into reality, in order to preserve our common security, our democracies and a free information space.” We look forward to returning to this topic next week when the Representative on Freedom of the Media joins us.

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