



Remarks by
Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Thomas O. Melia
at the Conference on Journalists' Safety in the OSCE Region,
Vilnius, Lithuania
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Session 1: Role of Governments in Ensuring Safety of Journalists

Thank you, Dunja, for the warm welcome and for all the work that your office and our Lithuanian hosts have put into making this conference a reality. I am grateful for your including me today on this panel of experts. I value the input that my colleagues have shared today, and I hope to build upon their helpful remarks by sharing some thoughts of my own, as a government official, on what *we*, the participating States, must do to ensure the safety of journalists.

I am sorry to say that the topic of this conference is all too fitting and necessary. We know, unfortunately, that the threat against independent broadcast, print, and online journalists in our region is very real.

The Committee to Protect Journalists, in its global campaign against impunity, has noted that 546 journalists have been killed around the world with complete impunity since 1992. Three countries from our region – Russia, Tajikistan, and Turkey – are on the list of the top 20 countries that CPJ has recorded with unsolved, or in some instances entirely unaddressed, cases of murdered journalists. These murders are the most tragic cases, but there are hundreds more involving non-fatal violence against journalists that compounds the chilling effect.

Government officials in our region too often cast the reporting of what is happening in their countries as the problem to be addressed, rather than to focus on the underlying social issues that are being reported. Restrictive laws and

administrative measures constrain the fundamental freedom of expression and independent media outlets and their employees are subjected to government harassment, as well as threatening actions by private actors tolerated by governments.

Last October a court in Uzbekistan convicted Voice of America stringer Abdumalik Boboyev of “libel and insulting the Uzbek people,” and fined him approximately \$8,000. Boboyev told the Committee to Protect Journalists the conviction was in retaliation for his critical reporting on the widespread government corruption, human rights abuses, the weak economy and flaws in the Uzbek healthcare system. In May, the government denied Boboyev an exit visa to travel to Germany, where he had been awarded a scholarship from the Hamburg Foundation for the Politically Persecuted.

In April, Turkmen authorities confined 80-year old Amangelen Shapudakov, a Radio Free Europe contributor, to a psychiatric hospital after he criticized a local government official for corruption in an interview with Radio Azatlyk, RFE's Turkmen Service. Still, we welcome the Government of Turkmenistan’s pledge to the Chairman-in-Office during a meeting in Ashgabat last week to welcome a visit by Dunja Mijatovic before October, and hope for a frank discussion of this and other cases.

You all well know the challenges – many of you are journalists yourselves, working under repressive conditions despite the grave risks – and we are here today to broach solutions that may well involve governments and journalists working in partnership. I want to note with appreciation the presentation this morning by Professor Mikhail Fedotov, Chairman of the Russian President’s Council on the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights. He presented an analytical framework describing the various components of journalists’ safety, including physical, legal, informational, economic and psychological dimensions of safety. He also spoke about the shared responsibility for journalists’ safety on the part of government, the media, businesses, civil society, and the journalists themselves. Let me be clear: Governments bear the fundamental responsibility to ensure that journalists are free to practice their professions without interference or reprisal by state authorities. We must be frank about this basic governmental

responsibility as an essential step in mustering the necessary political will – to combat violence against journalists from any quarter.

As one of the few government officials on this panel today, I wish to focus on three areas where the participating States must take action: **First, and quite simply, we have a responsibility to uphold the solemn OSCE commitments we all have made in the area of media freedom.** These commitments clearly outline the importance of pluralistic, independent media and reflect our pledges – reaffirmed on multiple occasions – to foster it, not muzzle it. We owe it to ourselves and to our citizens to make them a reality. No excuses and no delay.

Second, we have a responsibility to investigate and prosecute violence against journalists, whether the suspected perpetrators are to be found inside or outside of government. Debates may rage in this room about when it is necessary or whether it can ever be appropriate to restrict speech, but none of us have laws on our books that make murder of, or violence, against citizens – including journalists – acceptable. When cases of violence against journalists languish, when justice is denied for the killing or beating of a journalist just because authorities do not like what he or she says, the rule of law that is necessary for modern societies to function successfully is undermined. Impunity must end.

We welcomed the news from Russia last week that a third suspect in the 2006 murder case of journalist Anna Politkovskaya – apparently the trigger man – had been apprehended, and we hope this will lead to a full public description of the crime and accountability for all involved. We call on Russia to take further steps towards addressing the problem of impunity for those who attack journalists, and will continue to raise the cases of Paul Klebnikov and Natalia Estemirova.

On February 7, unknown assailants attacked and seriously injured Hikmatullo Sayfullozoda, press secretary of the opposition Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan and editor of its newspaper. The United States and the European Union called on the government to conduct a thorough investigation of the attack and prosecute those responsible to the fullest extent of the law.

Third, we have a responsibility to ensure a public, political climate that is conducive to the functioning of independent, pluralistic media. Condemning and prosecuting violence against journalists is one key way to create such a

climate. Fostering open, frank public dialogue and debate on the whole range of domestic and foreign issues is also crucial. Government officials can lead by example, set the tone, and make it clear that they respect the role of free media in society, even when they disagree with a journalist's reporting or views.

Government officials can ensure that their ministries and departments establish professional press offices, make documents available to the press, and hold press conferences where journalists can ask – and even sometimes receive answers to – important questions about the functioning of government. Our governments need to do much more than apprehend murderers of journalists; we need to treat journalists as the vital partners in public service that they are.

Unfortunately, that is clearly not the case today in Belarus. The government there continues to severely restrict media by on-going efforts to close two of the few remaining independent newspapers in the country, *Nasha Niva* and *Narodnaya Volya*. In addition to threatening and detaining local journalists, the government continues to expel foreign journalists and ban their re-entry. President Lukashenko recently criticized Belarusian journalists who work with foreign organizations and ordered the government to "make sure those media organizations no longer work on our territory." This is taking Belarus further away from Europe and from the norms of democratic society enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act and many subsequent declarations, including most recently the 2010 Astana Commemorative Declaration.

Political leaders in my own country are often the most disparaged and lampooned of public figures, and are often made to feel as if the press will never give them proper credit for their accomplishments. Former U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson once said, "If one morning I walked on top of the water across the Potomac River, the headline that afternoon would read: 'The President Can't Swim.'"

The laws and policies that we as government officials are pursuing may be slowed down as public debate rages about them, questions and criticisms fly, and we are forced to more clearly articulate why something is necessary or beneficial – or to reconsider our policies or plans. I understand this all too well, as I came to government after spending much of my career in the non-governmental sector. I went from a life of criticizing and advising governments (not least my own) to a

position where I am obliged to explain, to our Congress and to the press, what our policies are and why they sometimes don't seem to be as effective as we would hope. Having been on both sides of the public dialogue, I can say that in either case, the role of the media is indispensable for illuminating facts, exposing abuses so that they may be corrected, explaining perspectives, and generating public momentum behind deserving policies. We need to commend the work of journalists in the effective governance and development of our societies, not constrain it.

As diplomats, journalists, or civil society representatives, we may cajole each other, point fingers, or win adherents to our sides of the argument in debates around media freedom or the press in gatherings such as this. But that cannot substitute for governments living up to their commitments and demonstrating the will that is necessary to ensure that journalists are protected, that our societies are open, and that the free flow information and ideas serves as a force for innovation, reform, growth and development within our countries, across the region and around the world.

I look forward to the rest of this conference and the ideas it will generate in support of media freedom, the work of journalists, and a successful future for our region. Thank you very much.