

**EUROPEAN UNION****OSCE Permanent Council Nr 1045
Vienna, 19 March 2015**

EU Statement on Freedom of Expression

The European Union wishes to draw attention to a series of recent developments in the OSCE region, related to freedom of expression, and its corollary freedom of the media, including a number of concerns.

The ongoing intimidation of media NGOs in Russia has already been highlighted by the Representative on Freedom of the Media. The Government's policy to control media outlets and stifle free voices also affects the conflict in and around Ukraine. Propaganda fueled by the Government of Russia is fomenting and exacerbating divisions. We again urge the Russian Federation to abide by its commitments and ensure media freedom and media pluralism, to allow for a genuine and open public discourse about issues of concern, including in relation to the crisis in and around Ukraine.

In Kazakhstan, we remain concerned about the shrinking space for free expression, including in the media. The Almaty City Court decision of 26 February to uphold the closure of the weekly magazine Adam Bol after, notably, reporting about Russia's aggression in Ukraine, as well as the harassment of individual journalists, hinder the establishment of a free and open debate that is essential to a prosperous and democratic country. We call on Kazakhstan to reverse this negative trend.

The release of journalist Hairullo Khamidov, imprisoned since 2010, is a welcome development. Nevertheless, freedom of expression continues to be severely limited in Uzbekistan. We encourage the Uzbek authorities to fully uphold this fundamental right. We join the RFoM in calling for the release of other detained journalists, and urge Uzbekistan to comply fully with its international obligations.

The recently adopted law on Public Peace and Order in Bosnia and Herzegovina's Entity of Republika Srpska, includes definitions which are vague and leave too much

room for arbitrary implementation. The law may also create undue self-censorship among social media users. The EU underlines that the fundamental rights of all citizens must be upheld without reservation, as an essential prerequisite of a healthy democracy. That, of course, includes the right to freedom of expression, online and offline.

In the past, we have raised several concerns about developments in Azerbaijan. We welcome the opportunity offered by the recent visit of EU Special Representative for Human Rights Stavros Lambrinidis, to discuss issues of concern related to freedom of expression. We will continue to follow closely the situation.

Finally, as we have expressed previously, we are appalled by the murderous attack in Copenhagen on the participants of the event “Art, Freedom of Speech and Blasphemy”. We condemn this attack in the strongest terms and express our condolences to the victims and their loved ones. This was an attack on our common core values, and we will remain united in standing up for the right to freedom of expression of every individual.

In raising these issues, we are aware that the RFoM has in recent weeks also raised concerns about recent developments in some EU Member States. We remain committed to improving our record, and to engage with the RFoM to address challenges and shortcomings. The RFoM remains a unique resource for all participating States to help us improve our implementation of commitments, and we fully support the way the Representative carries out her mandate.

Freedom of expression and freedom of the media, including safety of journalists, is a top priority for the EU in the OSCE, given notably the crucial role these rights play in the broad and comprehensive security concept that is the foundation of our organization. These and other recent developments serve to underline the continued need for the OSCE and its participating States to take renewed and intensified measures to promote and protect the fundamental right to freedom of expression. We warmly welcome the engagement of the Chairmanship in this regard, not least the upcoming Chairmanship conference in Belgrade on the protection of the safety and integrity of journalists. We encourage the Chairmanship to maintain a focus on this issue throughout the year and to consider how the broad support amongst

participating States for our proposed Ministerial Council decision on Freedom of Expression can be built upon.

The Candidate Countries the FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO*, ICELAND+ and ALBANIA*, the Country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and Potential Candidate BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA, and the EFTA country NORWAY, member of the European Economic Area, align themselves with this statement.

* The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

+ Iceland continues to be a member of the EFTA and of the European Economic Area.