



United States Mission to the OSCE

On International Human Rights Day

As delivered by Deputy Chief of Mission Tim Hanway
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
December 12, 2024

On December 10, we marked the seventy-sixth anniversary of the UN General Assembly's adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This landmark document reaffirmed that, quote, "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." The Universal Declaration also informed the principles enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act.

Despite this, we are witnessing democratic backsliding, erosion of the rule of law, and increased restrictions on the work of civil society activists and human rights defenders. In Ukraine, members of Russia's armed forces and occupying authorities have committed war crimes, atrocities, and other abuses. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights stated in its October 2024 report that Russia has "committed widespread violations of residents' rights to life, physical and mental integrity, liberty and security, and unlawfully restricted fundamental freedoms such as freedom of expression, assembly, religion and belief in territory of Ukraine under its occupation."

Russia continues to violate the human rights and fundamental freedoms of its own people, pursuing a seemingly never-ending crackdown on civil society and any hint of public dissent. As the UN's Special Rapporteur for Russia concluded in a September 2024 report, the Kremlin has escalated its harassment and intimidation of anti-war critics, doling out lengthy prison sentences for those who peacefully exercise their human rights. On November 29, a Russian court sentenced opposition politician Alexei Gorinov to a total of eight years behind bars for daring to criticize Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

In Belarus, the repressive Lukashenka regime persists in detaining and prosecuting its citizens for, in the words of the Helsinki Final Act, "knowing and acting upon their rights." Security forces have assaulted and arbitrarily detained journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens who peacefully challenge the regime and press for democracy. The regime unjustly holds approximately 1,300 political prisoners and forced members of civil society and independent media to flee abroad to escape persecution.

In Georgia, the ruling party has pursued a variety of anti-democratic actions, placing limits on the freedoms of assembly and expression and responding to recent peaceful protests with excessive force. The United States strongly condemns this brutal and unjustified violence against Georgian citizens, protesters, members of the media, and opposition figures. We call on Georgian Dream to cease its repressive tactics, including its use of arbitrary detention and physical violence, to attempt to silence its critics. We are

particularly concerned by reports of serious injuries sustained by people at the hands of law enforcement. Those detained for exercising their fundamental freedoms to peaceful assembly and expression must be released immediately and officials responsible for the unlawful use of force must be held fully accountable.

Taking cues from the Kremlin, several participating States – including Georgia, Hungary, and the Kyrgyz Republic – have passed so-called “foreign agents,” sometimes called “foreign influence” or “sovereignty protection” laws, which aim to silence independent voices and undermine the critical work that civil society organizations do.

In Azerbaijan, we have seen a multiyear crackdown on civil society, which has only escalated since the end of COP29. On December 6, the Azerbaijani authorities unjustly detained persons connected to independent outlet Meydan TV on spurious charges. On December 3, authorities in Azerbaijan detained Rufat Safarov, just days before he was to travel to Washington to accept the Secretary of State’s Human Rights Defender Award. Azerbaijan has also held in pre-trial detention for more than a year independent journalist Sevinj Vagifgizi, a recipient of the Secretary of State’s 2024 Anti-Corruption Champion Award. We urge the Government of Azerbaijan to immediately release all those unjustly detained, including Mr. Safarov, Ms. Vagifgizi, Mr. Azer Gasimli, Mr. Farid Mehralizada, Mr. Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, and Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu, among others, and to end its crackdown on civil society.

Respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms is an obligation we all share. In marking Human Rights Day, we reaffirm our commitment to advancing human rights for all. Lasting peace and prosperity requires respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all States and for the inherent rights and dignity of all persons.

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