



Statement by Congressman Alcee L. Hastings
Chairman
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Hearing on
“Freedom of the Media in the OSCE Region”
August 2, 2007

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to this Helsinki Commission hearing on freedom of the media in the OSCE Region.

Freedom of the media is freedom of expression at work. When the OSCE Permanent Council created the position of Representative on Freedom of the Media in 1997, it declared 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 accountable systems of government."

In practical terms, a free media in a democratic society keeps citizens abreast of the decisions of their government, and gives the citizenry the opportunity to make informed choices about the men and women who seek their permission to govern them. It provides a forum for both experts and average citizens to express their opinions and exchange alternative visions of the future. By exposing malfeasance and corruption in the corridors of government or in corporate board rooms, newspapers and the electronic media help remove the cancer of corruption from honest and productive enterprise.

In his June 2007 survey on media freedom in the OSCE region, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Miklos Haraszti, presents a mixed picture: progress in some countries, regression in others. It is clear that although the window dressing of democratic elections may be preserved in certain OSCE participating States, free media constitute a threat to leaders who would rule their nations for their own benefit or hold on to power long after their political shelf life has expired.

Particularly disturbing is the ongoing media crackdown in Azerbaijan. Electronic media are increasingly tightly controlled; independent ANS TV has to tread VERY carefully if it

doesn't want to lose its license. At present, seven journalists are in jail and there has been a series of physical attacks and fines on journalists. Over 20 journalists have openly sought political asylum abroad to protest the worsening conditions in the country. Yet President Ilham Aliyev's chief of staff recently said Baku will "never" take the libel and defamation articles off the books.

In some countries, journalism is not only a difficult profession, but sometimes a life-threatening one. It may be, as Alexander Solzhenitsyn said recently, "all too easy to take Russia to task with a long list of omissions, violations and mistakes," but the unfortunate fact is that according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, the Russian Federation has become the third most dangerous country in the world for journalists -- after Iraq and Algeria,. CPJ reports that since the year 2000, fourteen journalists have been murdered in the Russian Federation in retaliation for their professional activities. Only last month, both the board of the World Association of Newspapers and the United States House of Representatives passed resolutions calling on Russian authorities to investigate these unsolved murders more vigorously. I would note that in a few cases, investigative progress has been claimed by law enforcement officials, and I look forward to any additional information our witnesses may provide.

Today's subject is a complex and voluminous one, and I won't claim that we will do it justice in two hours of hearing time, nor would I assert that the media always act responsibly, or that journalists should be above the law -- when the law is properly formulated. But I can't help recall that Thomas Jefferson -- whose relationship with the press was, shall we say, uneven -- wrote in 1787 that if given a choice between having a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, he would not hesitate a moment to take the latter.

I've asked two of our witnesses today to present a survey of developments related to freedom of the media in the OSCE participating States, with a view toward negative trends or especially egregious cases or situations -- although we're always happy to hear good news, too. We will also be pleased to hear the testimony of a journalist from Russia whose harrowing personal experiences demonstrate the extremes to which certain forces will go in order to suppress the distribution of information.

Finally, I'd like to note that we had invited the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media to share his perspective with us today but, unfortunately, his schedule did not permit his attendance. He has, however, indicated his willingness to participate in a Commission hearing, so I am hopeful that we will be able to have him join us on another occasion.