

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

“Introductory Remarks: *A Dark Place*”

Committee Staff Present:

**Mark Toner, State Department Senior Advisor, Commission for Security and
Cooperation in Europe**

Participants:

**Harlem Désir, Representative on Freedom of the Media, Organization for
Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE);**

**Courtney C. Radsch, Advocacy Director, Committee to Protect Journalists;
Thomas Friang, Head of Advocacy Global Division, Reporters sans
Frontières;**

**Camille Eiss, Chief of Global Partnerships and Policy, Organized Crime and
Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP);**

**Martins Zvaners, Deputy Director, Media and Public Affairs, Radio Free
Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)**

**The Introductory Remarks Were Held From 5:06 p.m. To 5:33 p.m. in Room
200, Capitol Visitor Center, Washington, D.C., Mark Toner, State
Department Senior Advisor, Commission for Security and Cooperation in
Europe, presiding**

Date: Thursday, July 25, 2019

TONER: Well, I think we'll get started and let people filter in as they can. I'm glad we had the – some really good snacks. (Inaudible) – was saying that U.S. snacks are superior to European snacks. I don't know. (Laughter.) He said that on the record. No, I'm just – (laughs). But, anyway, I hope everybody indulged their popcorn fix and are ready to watch this movie.

The movie is a very compelling – I actually watched it over – a couple days ago. It's a very compelling documentary, a look at what is frankly a growing phenomenon, although not a new phenomenon, about online harassment of women journalists. And it's a very compelling look at that phenomenon, that's told primarily through interviews with the women journalists who have been attacked online. But I also want to recognize before we get started we have some distinguished guests among us.

First and foremost, I wanted to recognize and say that Congressman Steve Chabot, who, among his many duties, chairs the Congressional Freedom of the Press Caucus wants to be here, wanted to be here, but he is tied up in voting. There's apparently a vote going on right now. So we may see more people filter in. If he can come by, that's great. But certainly he's here with us today in spirit.

I'd also like to invite the representative of freedom of the media for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Harlem Désir, who's with us today. He just gave testimony in a hearing on the state of media freedom in the OSCE region. And he is largely – and his office – are largely responsible for the documentary that we're viewing. I think it's been shown in 11 countries or so. So if you'd like to come up, Harlem, and say a few words.

DÉSIR: Thank you, Mark. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It's a great honor for me and for my team to have this opportunity, after the hearing we just had in the Helsinki Commission, to be invited to present to you this documentary, "A Dark Place," that we have been producing together with the International Press Institute based in Vienna on the issue of online harassment of female journalists. It's part of our project called SOFJO, Safety of Female Journalists Online, on which we have been working for some years, and which came from just this reality that we've seen female journalists in very different contexts in the OSCE region. In countries where there is a lot of issues regarding press freedom, but also in the most advanced democracy, being subjected to a very specific kind of threats and harassment online, which are based on the explicit sexual threats, and which have a very strong impact on their work.

And as a matter of fact, it appears that most of the journalists were – and feel alone in front of these threats. And that this issue were not really discussed – neither as an issue related to safety, but also in the newsroom. So there was this idea to give a voice to the many – some of the many cases were aware of. And one of the – I believe the interesting aspect of this documentary is that it will bring you with these journalists in perhaps eight countries, I think, in their own condition of work and of life. And I want to praise the work of Javier Luque, who is the director, for traveling with some member of our office, and meeting the journalists, and to put all this testimony in the political context they are working on.

It is very different. Sometimes it's just journalists – you know, TV journalists, journalists who of course are linked to the courage of political life, but not always very sensitive issues, even if all political issues are sensitive. Sometimes it's a journalist working on corruption issues, and most delicate issues where the threats can have very, very tough consequences. But all of them have been living under this pressure. And this documentary has helped us to organize debates, a lot of panels, discussion, with some of the journalists in the documentary, with other journalists. We have been presenting it in many film festival, human right film festival, in Vienna, in Geneva, in many other countries. But it's the first screening of the movie in the United States.

And I want to thank U.S. Congress and Helsinki Commission for this opportunity, and also all the different NGOs. And personality will take the floor, and Courtney Radsch from CPJ, and the member of the Reporters Without Borders who are here, another organization on media, and OCCRP, Radio Free Europe, and others who attend this event. We wish that this would be a wake-up call, that this documentary will help to make people aware of the reality of this situation that is not only a gender issue – I mean, it's, as a matter of fact, an issue for the whole press freedom, because it impacts the functioning of the whole media.

Because the journalists now are working – the women journalists – exactly with the same responsibilities as their male colleagues, as they cover the same kind of issue in conflict situation, in general information, in TV, of course, in corruption investigation. And so by being exposed, particularly as women – in fact, it's the whole press freedom which is under threat and which is exposed. And we wish that this help, and that's what we are working on. All stakeholders, law enforcement, the government, judiciary system – but also the colleagues in the newsroom to have a better understanding and to take into account this threat to press freedom. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

TONER: As Harlem mentioned, we do have quite an array of NGOs with us today, which is important as well for the first screening in the United States. Thank you for noting that. But I did this at complete random, not to show any preference of one – (laughs) – NGO to the other, but I don't know – Courtney Radsch – have I mangled your name?

RADSCH: Radsch.

TONER: Radsch. That was pretty good. Who is advocacy director for the Committee to Protect Journalists, who do wonderful work. And I'll just let her say a few words.

RADSCH: Thank you. Thank you so much. I am here on behalf of the Committee to Protect Journalists. But I think that one of the things that the issue of online harassment against journalists underscores is that we're not going to find solutions unless we all work together. And so I think it's really important that we have Reporters with Borders, the International Women's Media Foundation, The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, RFE/RL, and I'm sure there are others I don't know here, because what we've seen over the past few years is that there really has been a sea shift in recognition that online harassment against journalists is a press freedom issue. It is a journalist safety issue. And it disproportionately affects women journalists.

And this matters because it is a silencing crime. And whereas many of our organizations systematically track the imprisonment and the killing of journalists, and record impunity, it's much harder to track and to document these types of attacks. It's hard to do it systematically. And so these types of efforts – like the documentary, like these surveys that many of our organizations have done and the reporting that we do – is an effort to bring this out of the darkness, to be able to talk about it among journalists, in the newsrooms, with technology platforms, and to think about whether we have sufficient legal and regulatory frameworks to address this scourge of online harassment.

And we talk about online harassment, but sometimes we need to think about what is that really? Those are death threats, threats of rape, threats of violence. I mean, everyone in this room, I think, knows what we're talking about when we talk about online harassment. But I do think we need to talk about it in a way that helps others who aren't as familiar with it understand what it really means to be online harassed, to have your personal information put out online for anyone to come visit you at home.

And I also think that we need to – this is an important contribution to understanding the scope of the problem, but we also need to start talking about solutions. And this is going to be an important way to start that discussion. We need to think about technological solutions. What role do the platforms play, the design of their platforms, their policies, their terms of service, how they treat journalists and their accounts. How do we address this at the legal/regulatory level? Are there other legal frameworks that will enable us to address online harassment? How do we address this in the newsrooms? I think there has been a shift in the – in the culture of safety in newsrooms, realizing that this is an issue. But there's a long way still to go.

And so I want to thank the Helsinki committee and Congress for putting this issue on the agenda, for inviting the special representative here to testify about the threats and dangers that journalists are facing in the OSCE region, and to put this front and center. Thank you.
(Applause.)

TONER: Very well put. Second

(Off-side conversation.)

TONER: (Laughs.) Well, anyway, second we have – or, thirdly, I guess, we have Thomas Friang, who's the head of advocacy – the advocacy global division of Reporters sans Frontières. Is he here? Yes, he is. Hi, Tom.

FRIANG: Thank you for having this documentary projected. And thank you to host one of the leading public figures that we have across the globe, and especially in Europe, to present this, Mr. Harlem Désir. We are so happy that you're partnering on this. And I could not better echo what Courtney just said, that it's about putting our resources together – from governments, from international organizations and civil society, to put it out of the dark with such documentary, but also in the spotlight of other international organizations and governments.

That is why it is so important that the U.S. Congress has hosted this session today, because it is probably a good step to have the next U.N. General Assembly that's going to happen in September, where the U.N. secretary-general will have to report back on its action plan to increase, enhance, and better protect journalists. This plan of action has been there for a bit of a moment with, I would say, few impact and less transparency than impact on the means that were engaged in the U.N. system to deliver. And then it was – it is so important to have OSCE, which is an international organization, leading the best practices at the global stage to achieve these goals to discuss this, because it creates clearly the difference between what happens in Europe and what is being watched with the Helsinki Commission, and what could be happening at the U.N. level.

That is why it is so important that Reporters Without Borders, which is partnering on this issue with many civil society organization – including CPJ, that was for sure no issue of the order of speaking. (Laughter.) That is why it is so important that we can speak out on the fact that at the U.N. level there is also a need for inspiration not only by documentary but also from institutions. What we expect is actually to have a system that through United Nations agency programs offices is able to use the legitimacy – universal legitimacy of the U.N. to lead the way, engage with authoritarian regimes on the way to change their legislation and also address specific individual cases where safety of journalists, including female journalists, is at stake.

And therefore, we strongly hope that political drive to embody these – this need will be addressed by the appointment of a special representative of the U.N. secretary-general to lead the U.N. system to this – to this. And just like the OSCE has its own special representative to address media freedom and press – and press freedom. This is the way to bring this out of darkness, and in a spotlight of the next U.N. General Assembly. And that is something that the international community recommends to do. When you look at the report of Agnes Callamard on the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, she clearly states that whether it's in a form of a taskforce, or as we say in the form of a special representative of the UNSC on that, there is a need for political will.

And this is why it is so important that this event takes place in the U.S. Congress, because we're not lacking political will here, are we, after today's results on the bills regarding sanctions in those who perpetrated and commanded the execution of Jamal Khashoggi. So this is maybe the place for a spillover effect on getting there at the U.N. system. And we are so grateful that within the U.S. Congress we always have a voice to speak up and say: There is a need for greater political will at the U.N. level. Thank you. (Applause.)

TONER: Thanks. As I said, we have quite an array of folks here. Camille Eiss, is she here? Thanks. And – sorry, I apologize – she's chief of policy and global partnerships at the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project. Please. The floor is yours.

EISS: Good evening. Thank you to Chairman Hastings and the Helsinki Commission for your continued focus on these issues. And, of course, to Representative Desir for your really powerful testimony today, and all that you do.

My name is Camille Eiss. As was mentioned I'm at OCCRP, where I have the opportunity to serve on a global team that serves 45 independent media centers in 35 countries around the world, most of which are part of the OSCE. As was clear in today's hearings, the threats facing independent media across the region span far and wide – from the financial, to digital security, to physical security, to legal, to what we might call crisis of credibility in the face of persistent smear campaigns. Investigative journalists, especially those who expose organized crime and corruption – as I was glad to hear you highlight today – face a level of danger that the Committee to Protect Journalists has called as dangerous if not more dangerous than reporting in a war zone.

In the last couple of years that I have been on this job, I have had a ringside seat to what declining press freedom in Europe means for my colleagues and means for our network. From the more extreme cases that do make the news here, like the murder of our partner 27-year-old Jan Kusiak in Slovakia, to trumped-up tax evasion charges against Khadija Ismayilova, our regional editor in Azerbaijan, to the often less-recognized smear campaigns that are often facilitated by pro-government media that aim to turn the public against journalists. In 2018, OCCRP incurred more than 30,000 euros in legal fees alone.

There is also, of course, the harassment of female journalists, both online and offline, which for our network can range from constantly reminders that investigative journalism is the work for men – it's a man's job, to false sexualized accusations, all of which are intended to humiliate these award-winning journalists out of doing their work in the first place. For my colleagues, it's been interesting in talking to them and understanding how this phenomenon that I imagine the film – I know will get into. But it's just so much more rampant in countries that aren't necessarily topping the lists for concern.

In Slovenia, for example, where female journalists, including our own editor, routinely get mocked, slandered, and have publicly been called prostitutes. In the worst-case scenario, where journalists have been killed, OCCRP has spearheaded the continuation of cross-border reporting, working across our network and with our partners to ensure that the investigations are still finished, as in the case of Daphne Caruana Galizia and Jan Kusiak, and to send the message that killing a journalist will not kill the story. This has been one bright spot. It's one of which we are proud. But it's hardly enough.

More broadly, and on an everyday basis, our platform exists because we're working to shore up and directly provide the kind of digital and physical security support and the access to legal services that investigative journalists need every day simply on the course of the job. We think this includes counter-surveillance training, which we believe should increasingly be a prerequisite for doing this kind of work, along with the digital security to respond to ever-evolving threats. As an organization, we have never spent as much as we do today on security. But, again, it is not nearly enough.

As this community thinks about what more can be done, a huge emphasis needs to be put on investing additional resources directly into media outlets. I was glad to hear that raised earlier, and the focus on newsrooms and how they're treating security for this focus on in-house security support. And this means both staff and equipment. When one outlet is slandered, our

network works to collectively cover the attack and crowdsource ideas for engaging publics and proving the truth.

The online phenomenon that tonight's screening highlights is critical, just because of how vastly accelerated and widened the reach of these efforts are to intimidate and violate freedom of expression. Thank you to the OSCE and our representative's office for not only assembling this, but for bringing it here to Washington.

Just in closing, I think it's also important to emphasize – and was really pleased to hear it hammered home in the hearing today both by Chairman Hastings and the special representative – but is just the factor of political will that is behind this. You know, as much as we're engaging in this technological push and how much everything is online here, just the wider – the wider issue and the harassment itself, we really feel that this is where the sustained focus needs to be.

So just quickly to highlight, just this week we had one instance that kind of paints the full picture, where in response to recent reporting on high-level corruption in Serbia, OCCRP's member center, KRIK, was accused by a government tabloid of harassing the finance minister's brother's girlfriend and baby. Last night, most likely to confuse the public and appeal to those who are in greatest financial need, the police offered a reward for identifying the alleged perpetrator in the video. When I tweeted the story, the OCCRP published about it last night, flagging it for many of the watchdog organizations that are here at this event tonight, I got a reply calling me a CIA agent.

This cycle just continue to go on. It happens in a day, in a matter of hours. And the ultimate effect of these attacks, beyond just intimidating the journalists themselves, is actually discrediting independent media with the public, which risks both physical attacks on journalists and an uninformed citizenry. So political will, again, at the highest levels will be paramount to shifting this tide and curbing attacks.

So let me thank, again, the Helsinki Commission and the OSCE for what you are already doing. We're hoping for renewed and increased attention from members of the new European Parliament. And we will need all of your sustained support and pressure. Thanks for the opportunity to say a few words today. (Applause.)

TONER: Thank you. And just one more speaker from RFE/RL, close to my heart – an organization close to my heart – Martins Zvaners, who's the deputy director for media and public affairs. Martins, a few words, please.

ZVANERS: First, I'd like to thank the Commission and Chairman Hastings for your passionate and longstanding support for media freedom, and for giving me and my colleagues the opportunity to say a few words this afternoon. The topic is a vital one, as Representative Desir has pointed out today, and not just because of the many, many women – some of who's stories we're about to see here – have been – who have been targeted by the enemies of media freedom in the OSCE region. Media freedom serves as the foundation for so many of the freedoms we enjoy in the West and hope to see become more prevalent worldwide. For it is impossible to make rational, considered decisions about the world in which we all want to live

without the reliable, credible, and fact-based news and analysis professional media is able to deliver.

From our own experience with active RFE/RL news operations serving more than 18 OSCE-participating states, from our broadcasting center in the Czech Republic and 18 bureaus throughout the region, we can offer living proof to just how difficult the media situation has become. In some places, physical security is deeply challenged – such as war-torn eastern Ukraine, where contributors Stanislav Aseyev and Oleh Halaziuk have been held incommunicado by Russia-backed separatists of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic, or Russia – or Russia-annexed Crimea, where contributor Mykola Semena is prevented from leaving the peninsula following a Russian court’s finding that Ukrainian journalist’s criticisms of the annexation of Crimea constituted separatism.

In Russia, RFE/RL contributor Svetlana Prokopyeva has just been added to the country’s financial monitoring lists, targeting terrorists and extremists and is now prevented from accessing her bank accounts, because she dared to suggest in a commentary she made on her local Pskov affiliate of the Ekho Moskvyy station that the Russian government’s own actions might play a role in generating opposition to it. In other words, according to the Russian government, justifying terrorism through the use of the media.

We thank the OSCE for recognizing the inherent threat to independent journalism represented by the weaponization by governments from Belarus to Tajikistan of the generally bureaucratic act of accrediting journalists. And of course, we join with all friends of the media worldwide in decrying the especially ugly levels of harassment and intimidation to which investigative journalists are exposed. From Ukraine to Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan, from the Balkans and Central Europe to Central Asia and Russia, committed journalists, men and women alike, put their lives and professional – personal reputations on the line every day in order to serve the public good by holding powerful officials and corrupt elites to account. A single example of this is Natalia Sedletska in Ukraine, but she’s certainly not the only one, as we well know.

I thank the OSCE and Mr. Desir for your consistent support of media freedom and for backing us up at RFE/RL when the influential and powerful in the OSCE region take action against what we in the West respectfully refer to as the fourth estate. We and our journalistic brothers and sisters throughout the region, will not rest as long as corruption and impunity continue to corrode the social fabric and tip the scales of social justice. We need your help, and the help of all governments and people of goodwill, to achieve our mutual goals of justice, fairness, and empowerment for all. Thank you. (Applause.)

TONER: Well, all those remarks were very well-put. And now it’s time to watch the movie.

[Whereupon, at 5:33 p.m., the introductory remarks ended.]