



## OSCE Meeting Highlights Plight of Imprisoned Journalists

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Leading media representatives and government officials from around the world [are gathering in Vilnius, Lithuania today and tomorrow](#) to discuss the safety and freedom of journalists in the region. The meeting, hosted by the Lithuanian chair-in-office of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, is focusing on the “role of governments and civil society in protecting journalists” and highlighting “best practices” among OSCE participating states -- as such official conferences tend to do.

Unfortunately, in some of those states, not only do governments need to protect citizens from reporters, the journalists need protection from government officials themselves as well. Activists are hoping governments will specifically remember the plight of those who face harassment, prison, and even murder by their own governments for performing their journalistic duties.

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Audronius Ažubalis kicked off the conference by recalling the dozens of journalists killed or imprisoned in the OSCE countries and explained why protection of the media is so important:

When journalists can act without fear, security in their person and in their profession, they are empowered to bring vital information to the people. They become agents of democracy and freedom. They serve as a watchdog over the institutions of society. They can convey accurately and objectively the actions and attitudes of the power brokers of society. In this way, they are as vital as any other actor or institution in the democratic form of governance.

One region particularly inhospitable to journalism is Central Asia. Freedom House’s [2010 annual Press Freedom Index](#) ranked every country in Central Asia as “not free,” with Turkmenistan among the 10 “worst of the worst.” Governments in the region rely on libel laws and centralized ownership of major media outlets to encourage self-censorship and constrain independent reporting. More frightening, critical voices in this part of the world also face the very real threat of imprisonment or worse.

Annakurban Amanklychev and Sapardurdy Khadzhiev are human rights activists, journalists, and members of the Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation, which publicizes human rights violations in Turkmenistan. The men were working with French journalists to expose poor

conditions in the country when they were arrested on fabricated charges in June 2006. They were sentenced to seven years in prison after a sham trial that denied them due process, including their right to call witnesses. Now, Amanklychev and Khadzhiev languish in overcrowded, tuberculosis-ridden prison conditions, lacking proper medical attention, nutrition, and water. Credible reports indicate both men have been subjected to torture and forced drug injections. A third journalist, Ogulsapar Murdova, who was tried along with the two men, is reported to have died from torture in custody three weeks after the journalists' convictions.

Though indisputably better than its neighbor, Kazakhstan, too, imprisons journalists who seek to improve governance. Ramazan Yesergepov, an investigative journalist and editor, has been wrongfully imprisoned in Kazakhstan since early 2009. The government charged him with collecting state secrets after he published a security service memorandum that revealed attempts by security officials to interfere in a local criminal tax evasion prosecution. His sentence, three years in prison and two years suspension from journalism, came after a very flawed trial. On World Press Freedom Day, celebrated on May 3, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Dunja Mijatović called on governments to do more to protect journalists and recalled that Ramazan remains in custody in retaliation for his critical writing.

So far, OSCE officials have said all the right things about protection of journalists, but what is needed now is pressure on states to free those currently silenced in prison by their own governments for seeking to deliver us the information that advances liberty across the globe.

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