



19th Central Asia Media Conference
Open Journalism in Central Asia
Tashkent, Uzbekistan
18-19 October 2017

Opening remarks by OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

Check against delivery

Mr. Deputy Speaker,
Mr. Ambassador,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you all this morning at the opening of our 19th Central Asia Media Conference.

I am very pleased that this year's conference once again brings together media policy experts and practitioners from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Mongolia. This year, quite a few journalists and representatives of non-governmental organisations outside Central Asia have decided to attend and I am pleased about a continuing international interest in the work of my Office to support development and freedom of the media in the region.

It is my pleasure that we have been joined this morning by several prominent personalities of the country:

- Mr. Sarvar **Otamuradov**, Deputy Speaker of the Legislative Chamber of Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan;
- Ambassador John MacGregor, OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan;
- Mr. Ilkhom **Abdullaev**, Head of the Committee on Information and Communication Technologies, Legislative Chamber of Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan;
- and representatives of authorities of several Central Asian states.

This is the second time that the Conference will be hosted by Uzbekistan, thus providing a platform for practitioners, media actors, journalists, academics and government officials to examine the changing media environment and its future in the region.

We will also follow up on the conferences in Dushanbe in 2015 and Vienna in 2016 and talk about the situation of freedom of expression and media freedom in the region but also about regulation of the media and self-regulation in particular in response to the spread of extremist narratives and hate speech online.

This conference is held at a very important time of change in Uzbekistan. Development of media and media freedom are recognized as a priority in the action strategy of the country for the 5 coming years. It's a time of opportunity.

I want to welcome the release of human rights activist Ganikhom Mamatkhonov as well as, since the beginning of this year, of several journalists like Solijon Abdurakhamarov. We wish

and call for the release of other journalists still imprisoned in different countries of the region. We think it's possible and necessary.

In this conference we will look at the evolution of the media landscape from three points of view.

The first is the technological change and its many implications in terms of access to information for the whole population, the economic impact of digitalization for media actors, the potential for innovation and creation of new media outlets, and the new professional challenges for journalists.

The second aspect we will go into is the issue of ensuring freedom of the media in this new context. It includes media pluralism, safety of journalists, independence of public broadcasters, issues of regulation.

The third issue is the impact of the security context on free media: the fight against terrorism, extremism and hate speech is a necessity for the states but has to be dealt with while preserving freedom of expression and freedom of the media. And we will specifically look at international obligations and self-regulation.

I am pleased that our co-operation with the Transnational Threats Department (TNT) of the OSCE successfully continues here, but also in a number of other projects, thus helping to develop a comprehensive approach to the issue of freedom of expression vis-à-vis countering violent extremism.

This year we are offering another example of the inter-agency co-operation. The Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities has decided to join us and will offer a presentation of their work on guidelines on *National Minorities and the Media in the Digital Age*.

We will also have an interesting presentation of a regional program of environmental journalism, an important and timely initiative.

Ladies and gentlemen, this year we are celebrating twenty years of our unique institution, the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.

While the Office has become a player to count with, both in the OSCE region and globally, the problems facing the media community, alas, remain largely in place.

These include:

- Violence against journalists and impunity of perpetrators of such heinous acts. Just two days ago, journalist/blogger Daphne Caruana Galizia has been assassinated in Malta.
- Criminal defamation misused against the press;
- Discrimination in access of journalists, and in particular, unduly stringent rules of accreditation, and limitations in their movements due to security constraints.
- Undue governmental influence on media especially on Public Broadcaster.

In the region, a growing number of journalists have been tried. They are either serving their sentence or released on parole, but remain unable to exercise their duties on conditions of parole.

A number of journalists have also left their home countries as they were facing criminal investigations against them. Most commonly, the charges of inciting inter-ethnic or religious hatred apply, as much as extremism.

We must combine in a better way the responsibility of governments to guarantee the security of their country and of the population with their responsibility to also guarantee the right of citizens to receive and share information, especially on matters of serious concern, including information on conflict situation.

A strong reason for concern is pressure, applied to media by political and public figures through exorbitant fines in defamation cases. Such cases almost invariably end in the outlets saddled with ruinous damages, and sometimes closing down.

Economic fragility of the media can also have an impact on freedom of the media. Financial problems may undermine the independence of media. Sometimes, corruption has a detrimental impact on quality of journalism.

I insist on the premise that freedom of the media should not be seen as if it is in opposition to security needs. We must guarantee that anti-terrorism legislation, regulation of the Internet and policies countering hate speech are designed in full conformity with international obligations on media freedom, that they are proportionate, and that these policies do not strangle freedom of expression and freedom of the media.

The issue of fake news, disinformation and propaganda is poisoning the media community and the society at large. They can exacerbate already existing tensions and undermine trust in the media. The policies which try to curb these ugly phenomena should however not limit media freedom itself. Censorship is never the better answer. There are better antidotes against propaganda and disinformation; these are quality of information, ethical journalism, professionalism of journalists, self regulation. Quality journalism debunks fake news. Their public can be better equipped against fake news by media literacy projects, in education and in public media.

Ladies and gentlemen, freedom of expression and freedom of the media are the air of democracy and of a modern society. They create the space for open debate by all actors in society.

Open debate brings better understanding of viewpoints, and leads the way towards peaceful compromise solutions and to better governance of countries.

The media landscape is changing rapidly and profoundly as a result of digitalisation of media production and distribution. We need to analyse the consequences of these changes, in particular, how they affect pluralism of the media and freedom of expression.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank you all who have come to our conference.

I want to express my appreciation to the international and regional experts who have joined us.

I am also grateful to all government officials who are present here today. My thanks to the colleagues from OSCE offices in the region, for working with my Office on conference preparations. I would like to specifically thank the staff of the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan who have been instrumental in making this conference happen.

I want to thank the government of Norway for financially supporting the conference and to the Konrad Adenauer Foundation for supporting one of the side-events. Without their contributions and support this conference would not be possible.

Tomorrow we are planning to adopt recommendations based on the outcomes of our discussions. I will then share these with your authorities, to keep your governments aware of the issues.

Thank you very much.