



## 13<sup>th</sup> South Caucasus Media Conference

### *Multi-faceted challenges to free media and freedom of expression*

6-7 July 2016, Tbilisi, Georgia

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This document summarizes recommendations from more than 80 journalists, representatives of government and civil society from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, along with international experts and participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russian Federation and the United Kingdom at the 13th annual South Caucasus Media Conference, organized by the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media on 6-7 July 2016 in Tbilisi, Georgia.

The conference focused on the challenges to free media and freedom of expression in the region and the OSCE-wide best practices for improving pluralism and media freedom in the context of new technologies, regulations, conflicts and the like.

The conference participants agreed that:

1. Journalism today faces numerous economic challenges related to the enlarged scope of those using media to seek out, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, resulting in new forms of media and reporting practices. The challenges, however, are, in fact, new opportunities for freedom of information and freedom of expression that could be used by journalists, male and female, for the benefit of the public and their profession.
2. Violence and impunity remain a problem in the South Caucasus, thus note should be taken of the efforts to end impunity elsewhere in the OSCE region. Governments should condemn all attacks on and harassment of journalists and other media actors and hold perpetrators of such acts responsible by investigating these incidents promptly, effectively and independently.
3. Of particular concern is the online abuse of female journalists and bloggers, which contributes significantly to a hostile environment for new forms of journalism, also known as citizen journalism. The public should be made aware of the problem, and it should be recognized and dealt with by governments and professional journalists' associations.
4. Criminalization of speech is a significant obstacle that inhibits political and investigative journalism and should be abolished wherever it still exists. The media

community and international organizations should make all necessary efforts in this regard.

5. There is significant reason for concern given the increased exploitation of the media for war propaganda and terrorism, as well as advocacy of national, racial, ethnic or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. There is an urgent need to unequivocally combat these phenomena. Governments should allocate resources to stop the spread of and prevent further use of media for terrorism and hateful propaganda, which should include restraint for funding of such media.
6. The ongoing efforts to strengthen the existing Network of media self-regulation organizations, part of the Eastern Partnership, should also be used to counteract propaganda for war and hatred, and national media councils should be given the support and freedom to function in an effective and responsible way.
7. There is a need to further promote media literacy in order to counter mounting disinformation and propaganda in the media.
8. At the same time, national security and counter-terrorism should not be used by the governments as justification for restricting the right to freedom of expression.
9. The role of the independent judiciary and regulatory media agencies is crucial during conflict. Their independence, therefore, must be guaranteed and respected by all state and media actors to avoid undue political or economic interference.
10. Media should implement the best business models and practices as they relate to the digital sphere to improve sustainability and value to the public. These new models should include new opportunities for media to function as a watchdog.
11. Governments should ensure media pluralism, especially during pre-election periods.
12. There is a need to review and, if necessary, amend legislation and policy to ensure that any restrictions placed on freedom of expression are prescribed by law in accordance with OSCE and other international standards, and conform to the strict tests of necessity and proportionality.
13. The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media should assist participating States in the implementation of appropriate policies and regulations in order to strengthen freedom of expression and freedom of the media as well as media pluralism in the South Caucasus.