



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media**

14th Central Asia Media Conference

From traditional to online media: best practices and perspectives

**Ashgabat, Turkmenistan
5-6 July 2012**

Opening Statement by Dunja Mijatović

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Colleagues and Friends,

I am pleased to return to Turkmenistan on the occasion of our 14th Central Asia Media Conference. This is my third visit. I came for the first time in September of last year to discuss the media-freedom situation and then again in November when I discussed media law reform and lectured at the Institute of Foreign Relations at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

My Office has been actively engaged in the extensive co-operation with the Government of Turkmenistan and OSCE Centre in Ashgabat in the field of media law reform and media education since my first days in the Office in March 2010.

In April this year our expert participated in week-long consultations on the new media law with the members of the working group established by the Parliament in 2011. We look forward to a discussion of this draft whenever it is formalised and presented for our legal review. And I hope that, as a result of our co-operation, the parliament will soon adopt a modern liberalised media law that meets the highest international standards and demands of the 21st century. We also support our co-operation with the Institute of Foreign Relations at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Following my lecture to the students during my previous visit to Turkmenistan an exchange between the Institute and MGIMO University in Moscow was facilitated.

This visit is particularly important, because Turkmenistan is hosting our conference for the first time ever and I am sure all participants and experts are excited to be here, in Ashgabat. I would like to thank the authorities for their kind hospitality and in particular Mr. Rashid Meredov for his instrumental support and personal involvement in implementation of this important initiative.

I am also pleased to welcome more than 150 journalists, representatives of non-governmental media organizations, parliamentarians, government officials, academics, as well as well-known international experts from all Central Asian states and Afghanistan.

I would also like to thank the authorities of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan for ensuring the participation of their delegations at the conference.

I should also note the excellent work carried out by OSCE field operations in Bishkek, Astana/Almaty, Dushanbe and Tashkent, as well as our international partners, because without their support and assistance this conference would not have been possible. Special thanks go to our OSCE colleagues in Ashgabat.

Finally, my thanks go to the governments of the France, Germany, Lithuania, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States, whose generous financial support to this conference cannot be overestimated and deserves a special mention.

The Central Asia Media Conference has been a tradition of my Office for 14 years, pretty much from the time this Office was established. It has been able to bring together journalists to discuss an important media topic and media freedom challenges in the region.

This year we are discussing online and social media, and introducing a new format.

We will start with international experts sharing their experiences and then follow up with some practical, hands-on master class in online media regulation led by Albany Associates, an international consulting firm.

Tomorrow our colleagues from Central Asia states and Afghanistan will speak about their realities, reflect on what is going well and finding solutions to the existing challenges.

We have an interesting topic for you. The emergence of new media and ever-growing use of social media tools have completely changed the ways people stay connected and informed. The transition from traditional to online media has fundamentally changed the way how people obtain and exchange information. These changes are present in Central Asia as well. New media offer more equal participation and interactivity. Today Central Asia is witnessing the ever increasing role of online media in the society.

But we face troubles worldwide, including here in Central Asia.

The Internet has become subject to unnecessary restrictions in too many places. Every government has a duty to fight terrorism or illegal activity such as child abuse on the Internet, but no government has a right under the guise to fight cybercrime to block websites or initiated freedom of expression restrictive laws. We should remember that there is no security without free media and there is no free media without secure environment.

Governments should invest in infrastructure to ensure that more people have access to the Internet and promote Internet literacy to empower users make educated choices in regards to their Internet experiences. And in many places, the Internet remains out of the reach of people because it simply costs too much. And in some those who use the Internet, including journalists and bloggers, are increasingly subject to harassment and jail.

The political environment and legal constraints in the region pose challenges to the development of online media. Systematic blocking, filtering and censoring of websites are shaking the basic principles of freedom of the media. And I am mandated by the OSCE commitments to work on these issues for open, free and safe Internet. 22 years ago participating States agreed during the Copenhagen Conference on the Human Dimension¹ held that everyone has the right to free expression and to communication without government interference, and in Permanent Council Decision 633 of November 2004 the participating States expressly committed themselves to ensuring that the Internet remains an open and public forum for freedom of opinion and expression. This is what I expect from Central Asian states and all the other participating States.

One should not have to make the case for the Internet; its benefits are obvious. We are standing at a crossroads in the development of the Internet. Unless individuals and businesses make their voices heard we may see the end of an open Internet – taking choice and control away from the user and putting more power in the hands of those who would limit our access to information.

At the end of the conference I hope we will adopt a declaration on this important subject which will be translated into all languages of the 5 Central Asian participating States.

I will share it with your authorities, so the discussions that we will have here continue in your home countries after the conference.

I wish you all an interesting and fruitful conference.