



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
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Statement at the Permanent Council
(Review of Current Issues)

Restrictions on journalists reporting from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

Vienna, 27 August 1998

I would like to call your attention today to the situation of working conditions for foreign journalists in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The ongoing conflict in Kosovo is not only an internal affair of the FRY. International media covering the conflict are an essential source of information.

I am troubled by recent reports of the expulsion of several journalists from Kosovo, and the apparent reluctance of the Belgrade authorities to grant entry visas to a number of other legitimate journalists seeking to report on this conflict. I have also received reports of harassment of journalists freely practising their profession, often at the risk of their own safety.

Today, I have been informed about cases of Serbian journalists missing or ill treated by the so-called Kosovo liberation army. I urge upon all Governments which may have influence on Kosovo Albanians to use this influence to free these journalists.

The Helsinki Process, since its very beginning in 1975, referred to the common objective of facilitating "the freer and wider dissemination of information of all kinds(...) and to improve the conditions under which journalists exercise their profession in another Participating State". In 1975, President Tito signed the Final Act on behalf of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. However, the practice of restricting journalists I have just mentioned is not consistent with the OSCE commitments which aim at free flow of information and improved working conditions for journalists. These commitments are now widely observed throughout Europe.

In the past month, I have written three letters to the Foreign Minister of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia expressing my concern and urging the Belgrade authorities to allow unimpeded access to the media to cover the events in the country, especially in Kosovo.

Answers from the Government in Belgrade claim that freedom and independence of the media exist in the FRY. On 31 July in a response to one of my letters, Deputy Foreign Minister Ambassador Branko Brankovic took the occasion to refer to what he called "the lofty goals of freedom of information". In his second letter of 20 August he reiterated his respect for what he called "the principle of freedom of all media." It is precisely those "lofty goals" and this stated commitment to the principle of freedom of the media which are at stake today in Kosovo with the reluctance of the Belgrade authorities to allow journalists free access and free movement to report on the conflict.

I hope this emerging pattern can be curtailed. I call on the Belgrade authorities to cease the expulsion of journalists freely practising their profession, and to grant without delay entry visas for legitimate media, thus enabling the world to gain an accurate picture of this troubling and tragic conflict.