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EU Statement on World Press Freedom Day

Sunday 3 May marked World Press Freedom Day, which is an occasion to reflect on the indispensable role that free, diverse and independent media plays in democratic societies.

The EU welcomes the theme for this year's World Press Freedom Day: *Journalism without fear or favour*. In the OSCE specifically, World Press Freedom Day serves as a reminder to fully implement the commitments we have made in this field, to make sure that critical voices can be heard and that journalists and media actors can perform their work, safely, independently and without undue interference and influence. Free expression and free media, both online and offline, are cornerstones of our common security.

In these unprecedented times, when misleading or false information can put lives in danger, the need for free, diverse and independent media, both offline and online, is as important as ever: journalism also helps to detect and counter disinformation by providing fact-based and fact-checked information. Unfortunately, the coronavirus pandemic is exacerbating already existing threats to press freedom around the world, including in the OSCE area. As stated by the High Representative Josep Borrell on behalf of the EU in the statement on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, "in times of uncertainty, more than ever, access to reliable fact-checked information, that is free from undue interference and influence, is crucial and contributes to a more resilient society".

On World Press Freedom Day, all participating States should examine their implementation of OSCE commitments related to freedom of expression and the media. In line with the OSCE commitments, participating States should also ensure the safety of all journalists. It is therefore of paramount importance that participating States focus on the implementation of the Milan 2018 Decision on Safety of Journalists.

Without freedom of expression and freedom of the media, an informed, active and engaged citizenry is impossible. Regrettably, in much of the OSCE region, the trend is far from positive. We continue to follow with concern the situation of media freedom and safety of journalists in many OSCE countries. We have raised our concerns many times in the OSCE Permanent Council and in the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting about the worrying developments regarding media freedom situation in Azerbaijan, Turkey, the Russian Federation and in other participating States in the OSCE region. We continue to voice our concerns about particular cases related to media outlets and journalists.

The High Representative also noted that “it is a matter of concern that the COVID-19 pandemic is being used in some countries as a pretext for imposing undue restrictions on freedom of the press”. In this context, we echo the concerns expressed by the RFoM regarding the adoptions of decrees and amendments which could restrict the media and journalists from reporting freely on the coronavirus pandemic. While these decrees and amendments are meant to fight disinformation on the pandemic, they could lead to censorship and self-censorship and undue restrictions on the work of journalists. Regarding EU’s response on fighting disinformation about COVID-19, the High Representative underlined that “this involves promoting trustworthy sources, demoting false or misleading content, and taking down content that is illegal”. Many specific cases have recently been mentioned by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and we echo his concerns on the worrying cases of Elena Milashina, Svetlana Prokopyeva and others, as well as regarding the advertising ban and restrictions on Evrensel daily newspaper and others. We condemn threats by state officials against journalists because of their reporting about the pandemic, or their detention or investigation for the same reason, or the removal of media content under the pretext of spreading false information about the pandemic. Not granting to detained journalists

the same treatment and chance to be released as to other inmates just because they are journalists is unacceptable. We notice that there is a clear correlation between suppression of media freedom in response to the coronavirus pandemic, and a country's ranking in human rights and media freedom indexes.

We are aware that the European Union and its Member States are not immune to problems and shortcomings, and the current unprecedented situation presents challenges to us all. In advancing the situation for media freedom within the EU, Member States seek to engage fully with the Office of the RFoM and deeply appreciate these exchanges.

The EU encourages all participating States to engage constructively and in good faith with the Representative on Freedom of the Media, to heed the concerns he raises, including in addressing impunity, and to draw on the expertise of the Office. The RFoM is a unique resource of utmost value to participating States, and the EU stands firmly by the institution, including the mandate of the Representative and the provision of adequate funds to the Office.

The Candidate Countries REPUBLIC of NORTH MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO* and ALBANIA*, the Country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and Potential Candidate BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA, align themselves with this statement.

* Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.