

**STATEMENT BY
THE OSCE REPRESENTATIVE ON FREEDOM OF THE MEDIA,
MR. HARLEM DÉSIR, AT THE 1191st MEETING OF THE
OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

5 July 2018

Mr. Chairperson,
Ambassadors,

It is an honour for me to present my second report to the Permanent Council to you today, almost a year to the day after having been appointed OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.

I should like today to sound an alarm in view of the seriousness and the worsening of the situation with regard to freedom of the media that we have witnessed during the last period.

During this year, journalists have continued to be imprisoned, additional newspapers have been banned, more online information sites have been blocked, restrictions to Internet access have increased, attacks on journalists have persisted and journalists have been murdered in even greater numbers.

In the United States of America a week ago, Gerald Fischman, Robert Hiaasen, John McNamara, Rebecca Smith and Wendi Winters – four journalists and a member of the staff of the *Capital Gazette*, a daily newspaper in Annapolis, Maryland, one of the oldest newspapers in the United States – were killed at work in the newspaper's offices, killed for doing their jobs.

Their names may be added to those of Daphne Caruana Galizia, murdered in Malta, Ján Kuciak, shot in Slovakia with his fiancée, Kim Wall, a Swedish journalist killed in Denmark, Halla Barakat and her mother Orouba Barakat, Syrians, killed in Turkey, and Zachary Stoner, killed by bullets in the United States.

We could add the mysterious death of Maxim Borodin, an investigative journalist who fell from the fifth floor of his apartment building in Yekaterinburg, a death about which I have requested an in-depth inquiry.

All of them have died under violent circumstances during the past year, a year in which the unthinkable has become more commonplace for editorial offices and unacceptable for us. Being a journalist today has become one of the most dangerous professions in the

world. It is not only war reporters and those covering armed conflicts. No, the simple fact of being a journalist, of investigating, publishing and commenting on questions of public interest, political, economic, security, corruption issues, or even being a newspaper illustrator or cartoonist, has become hazardous.

And the press is more exposed than ever in a climate too often marked by recurrent attacks, systematic challenging, and repeated threat and hate campaigns directed at journalists. One of the symptoms of this climate is the increasing publication of lists of targeted journalists.

This climate is dangerous.

It degrades the quality of public debate, weakens the watchdog and information role of the press, and increases the risks to the safety of journalists.

The press is a fragile democratic institution, even more when the winds of extremism, populism and violence blow stronger, stirred up on social media under the protection of anonymous accounts or by fanatic groups.

Many journalists are explicitly and individually targeted, particularly investigative journalists, but not only them. Female journalists are the object of odious harassment and the most cowardly threats.

In most cases where journalists have been killed, they had received threats beforehand.

I ask the participating States today to treat death threats against journalists, including those through the Internet, with the greatest vigilance so that they are systematically investigated and their authors identified, prosecuted and sentenced with the greatest firmness.

Too often, impunity remains the only consequence of threats and attacks on journalists, including murder.

Every time acts are committed with impunity, it is a defeat for democracy and a victory for those who seek to intimidate or gag the press.

Combating impunity should be a priority for States, and international co-operation needs to be developed as much as necessary to stop criminals who target journalists.

I have seen the courage of the journalists who have been attacked, the courage of Olivera Lakić in Montenegro after having been shot in the leg in front of her home, of the son of Daphne Caruana Galizia, and of the colleagues and friends of Ján Kuciak. We see all the magnificent homage paid to the five dead from the *Capital Gazette* in Annapolis and the determination of their colleagues to continue their work in the service of the city's community.

But the journalists' courage is not enough. States have the responsibility to protect the press at this time of high risk.

The press is an indispensable but vulnerable democratic institution. It is not an institution within the State. It is composed of hundreds if not thousands of diverse and independent actors in each country, and that is its very nature.

That is what makes it fragile and in need of protection as a property shared by all of society.

This is the reason for the commitments undertaken by the OSCE participating States regarding freedom of the media.

States have undertaken to protect freedom of the media and the safety of journalists not because the media support them but because of their irreplaceable role in society and democratic life. And because it has been recognized within the OSCE that freedom of the media is an essential element of our collective security.

Every time a journalist is attacked, access to information, freedom of expression, democracy itself are being attacked.

In a climate of hostility towards the media, we see the temptation of certain leaders to take advantage of the legitimacy of their popular majority to question the legitimacy of the press and its critical role.

But it is in the very nature of the press to be critical of those in power, whoever they might be. This is the very condition for open, pluralistic and informed debate in society and by governments who are responsible to their citizens. The press annoy governments but they help to make governments better.