



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
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Report to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to concentrate today on one specific item: the consequences of 11 September for the work of my Office. I had the chance to talk to a lot of people within our participating States during the last months, who shared my fear that the wide attention previously given by many governments and international organisations to human rights issues, including freedom of expression, will somewhat fade into the background with the enormous new challenges stemming from the fight against criminal terrorist acts. But terror must not kill freedom in general and freedom of expression, in particular.

Already worrying developments are occurring in both the East and the West, with national security matters taking priority, sometimes even squeezing certain civil liberties. I already spoke at the OSCE Permanent Council in the aftermath of 11 September, and now I would like to share with you, the parliamentarians, my concerns.

I do not want to sound alarmist but I hope we are not too late for this discussion once these new patterns are solidified through legislative, political and other means available to governments. The fragile state of human rights in some of the OSCE countries could be further undermined if the old democracies in the West and in Northern America set precedents, however minor they may seem, that can then be used by governments to stifle dissent.

A recent report in the American press worries me: This week the *New York Times* wrote that the Pentagon was developing plans to provide news items, possibly even false ones, to foreign media organisations as part of a new effort to influence public sentiment and policymakers in both friendly and unfriendly countries. I hope this plan is not approved by the Bush administration, because, any such action in a developed democracy may lead to something similar in an emerging one. Already the Russian media is reporting interest in the Pentagon plans among officials of the Administration of the Russian President.

I have mentioned this case several times. Let me do it again: the problematic reasons given for firing the City Editor of the *Texas City Sun* for publishing an unflattering comment about the US President, although worrying, will not weaken the solid foundation of freedom of expression in America: the country's First Amendment.

There are participating States, however, where a similar action might have an effect on the already heavily pressured media. If the spokesman of any of the leading Western democracies says that everybody "needs to watch what they say", that could be interpreted as a slip of the tongue but could be considered a negative example throughout the world, welcomed by some, unacceptable for others.

When the *National Union of Journalists* in Great Britain warns that at a time of crisis the “BBC goes straight into “Ministry of Information” mode,” this concerns us and our work. However, the average British citizen will still have numerous sources to choose from for news. This is not the case in countries where the state broadcaster is the predominant one. And we have several such countries as our participating States. You all know their names.

Here is one latest example: Uzbekistan journalist Ruslav Sharipov, shortly before he was due to go to the United States to testify about the worsening human rights situation in Uzbekistan, was beaten up several weeks ago. Sharipov, the Uzbekistan correspondent of the Russian news agency *Prima* and President of the *Uzbek Independent Journalists' Union*, was attacked on 5 February by three men. The next day he was attacked again by two men who also seized his passport and journalist's card. He was previously attacked on the night of the 30th of January in Tachkent by two police officers. Commenting on this case, *Reportiers sans frontieres*, a respected media NGO, stressed that the government of Uzbekistan is “using the excuse of fighting terrorism to brutally repress any independent journalism in the country.”

No excuse should be used to abuse human rights. I would like to once again underline that national security concerns and the need to combat terrorism should also not be used as excuses, although the temptation is there. The credibility of the OSCE is based, among other things, on its ability to rise to the new challenges facing us in the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September. I have already said in this hall: the Third Basket should not become a hostage to the First one. We should all remember that.

The points I have just raised came up at the Third Central Asian Media Conference organised by my Office together with the OSCE Centre in Almaty on 10-11 December. The focus of the conference was “Media Freedom in Times of Anti-Terrorist Conflict.”

In a declaration adopted at the end of the conference, the participants called on the governments within the anti-terror alliance not to use national security arguments to limit human rights. “The media should be free to exercise their corrective function towards economic, ecological and military decisions in their countries, especially in times of conflict. The free public debate is imperative,” the declaration states. “Especially after 11 September the media should not be prevented (from) informing the public about existing financial links between terrorist group activities and corruption.” My conversations with journalists in the margins of the conference proved that our concerns were very well founded.

My other priority will be monitoring and reacting to instances of “hate speech” in the media. For example, I just recently visited Russia, where, among other officials, I met with the Deputy Minister of Education, many journalists, who informed me that cases of intolerance against non-Russian ethnic groups were not uncommon in the media. In Sweden, for example, the *Union of Journalists* is monitoring cases of intolerance. A new upsurge of ethnic intolerance, especially against Muslim communities, is also a fall-out from the events of 11 September.

One of the approaches I developed is targeted at young people in south-eastern Europe. The project titled “*mobile.culture.container: In Defence of our Future*” (more like a mobile community centre-library) addresses the young generation in a post-conflict situation. With the help of contributions from the governments of participating States, it aims to abolish and prevent “hate speech,” to help young citizens 14-18 years old in cities in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to co-operate and take the responsibility for a stable and peaceful future. The projects’ activities change the young

people's way of thinking, prompt them to cross the boundaries that separate them and to begin the discourse of a new generation of enlightened citizens. Their vision turns away from the past and focuses on a shared future and a shared responsibility for this future. I plan to continue with this project this year and maybe, at some point, one can discuss moving this centre-library to a different post-conflict area in the OSCE region.

We continue monitoring and defending freedom of the media in the whole OSCE region, as we all like to say: from Vancouver to Vladivostok. My Office does not have any geographic priorities, any "favourite" countries. We are "geographically blind." The OSCE participating States have all signed up to the OSCE commitments and should be accountable for adhering to them. We are living now in difficult times when the temptation to roll back on some of the civil liberties under the "fighting terrorism" flag is stronger than ever. That is why the OSCE institutions dealing with human rights, in conjunction with you, the parliamentarians, should be vigilant in bringing to the public's attention any such attempts and hopefully stopping them in their tracks.

Here I would like to point out three different issues that are very important for my Office.

I just returned from a trip to Russia where I was briefed in detail on the case of Olga Kitova, a correspondent for the regional newspaper *Belgorodskaya Pravda*. I have spoken on several occasions about her plight, her fight against corruption and her court battles. Last December, she has been sentenced for libel to a 2,5 year suspended prison term. She is currently appealing her sentence. What struck me in her case is a lack of journalistic solidarity with a colleague who is under the pressure of a brutal campaign orchestrated by the regional administration. I was informed of how a group of police officers dragged her to a police station. It is incredible what she had to go through. And I doubt that her troubles are over.

There were several media reports about her case in Russia, but I expected a much wider campaign of solidarity with a journalist so much in need of such support. The gravity of her situation has been understood by some and I am grateful that among those were individuals from the Administration of President Putin, local and international NGOs. However, she needs more help and I urge the Russian parliamentarians who are present here to look into the really tragic state that Olga Kitova is in.

On Italy. On several occasions I have spoken on the constitutional challenges faced by that country when the Head of Government controls most of the electronic media. Let me again quote *Reportiers san frontiers*. Recently they sent a letter to the Prime Minister stressing that "Italy is on the verge of becoming the only European Union member state and the only sizeable Western democracy where all audio-visual media outlets, both private and public, are controlled either directly or indirectly by the sitting government." This is also a challenge to the OSCE, one that not only my institution but also the parliamentarians must deal with.

My Office has followed closely the deteriorating media situation in Belarus. I will not go into the cases of harassment of media and journalists in this participating State that have been raised by my Office over the past months. On the positive side, I appreciate the discussion held on media in Belarus by the relevant Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe this January. I welcome the recent statements made by the Belarus Information Minister who promised to provide the new draft media law to international organisations for evaluation. I expect the Belarusian government to ensure a broad public debate on this issue.