

"National Consultation on Media and Information Literacy Policies and Strategies"
10.03.2022

Welcoming Remarks by the Representative on Freedom of the Media

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by wishing you all a very good morning.

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to address you today at the opening of the National Consultation on Media and Information Literacy Policies and Strategies.

I welcome the fact that these consultations will address the challenges of information disorder that we all experience, and which are largely fuelled by misinformation and disinformation. I am confident that our discussions will shed light on the ways media and information literacy can be part of the solution to this problem. Let me underline that media and informational literacy is one of my priorities as the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am raising these issues in a very difficult moment for the OSCE region, for our common security, for our Organisation.

On many occasions I have raised my concerns about the steady decline in media freedom all over the OSCE region, a climate that worries me greatly. A climate in which many do no longer seem to understand what is at stake. In which many seem to have forgotten that free and independent media are one of the core pillars of our democracies and one of the conditions for its progress and development – and thus a precondition for a better life for all of us.

Across the OSCE region and the entire globe, journalists are arbitrarily prosecuted and imprisoned – lately also – under the pretext of measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus, or hate speech or simply fake news.

We can also observe an increasing distrust against media and a growing anti-media sentiment, which in itself has various root causes. It is fueled by populist and authoritarian tendencies and further exacerbated when political leaders and public officials intimidate, threaten, condone or fail to condemn violence against journalists. But it is also a result of the immense spread of misinformation and disinformation online, which has been further exacerbated in the past two years by the ongoing pandemic.

Especially in social media, disinformation that mimic journalism have become a profitable business for some less scrupulous actors. They influence public opinion and undermine trust in quality media. Lies and disinformation can fuel anger and hatred, also towards journalists that aim to report the truth. In this way, journalists may become targets of attacks, including physical threats. This is a prime example of disinformation destroying public order – we observe this phenomenon across the OSCE space.

Together with these challenges, we witness a decline of online safety, namely regarding women journalists, with a severe impact on diversity and pluralism, with a growing number of women leaving their profession because of the threats they face on a daily basis.

“There is no security without free media”. This is the slogan we selected for the 25 year anniversary of the RFOM Mandate. The tragic events unfolding before our eyes confirm this thesis. Disinformation is one of the current threats to security in our OSCE region. As disinformation can fuel conflicts, erode social cohesion and weaken our democratic systems.

So what is the solution?

There are several ways of addressing the issue of disinformation.

Let me briefly focus on a few of them.

One can engage in wholesale banning and blocking sources of alleged disinformation. This may in itself have a chilling effect on public discussion and lower the level of public engagement. And the current technologies often allow for circumventing such measures. The OSCE principles and established international practice allow for blocking and banning in exceptional circumstances, which are spelled out in

international law, namely Art. 19 and 20 of the ICCPR. It is paramount that we strike the right balance and that, when fighting disinformation, we foster the free flow of and access to information.

Media self-regulation, including media ombudsmen, media councils and codes of practice, are another way of protecting the public against disinformation. It requires a high level of cooperation and also trust among media actors. It is highly effective, when these conditions are fulfilled. My Office promotes this approach by supporting such an enabling environment for media self-regulation. Respect for truth and verification of reports of facts represent a fundamental principle of the journalists' work. Journalists strive for the truth, often at a great cost. The phenomenon of false news seeks to undermine the core of the profession and its *raison d'être*.

Our event today is devoted to the third approach, which engages the audience of the media, the general public: media and information literacy. Media literacy may well be the most resource-intensive and still the most sustainable and in the long run the most effective way of building resilience against disinformation.

We therefore recognise that media literacy should also include media freedom literacy – an awareness of the right to information, of the importance of freedom of the media in society. If the consumers of media are aware of the principles of professional journalism, they themselves will be able to hold media accountable for the quality of information. This is what is sometimes called “crowd self-regulation”. This approach can be extremely powerful in upholding international standards on freedom of expression with long-lasting effects as deeply rooted in the society as a whole.

I have often stressed the need for governments to promote media and digital literacy, including by engaging with media outlets, civil society and other stakeholders. In my recently published Policy Manual: Spotlight on Artificial Intelligence and Freedom of Expression I call on the OSCE participating States to establish sustainable media and digital literacy programmes for all societal groups. I recommend that a national media literacy programme needs to engage a wide range of actors who can share best practice and cooperate for achieving sustainable results.

In reaction to the many requests that I have received, I am currently preparing the start of a project, which will assist participating States with concrete guidance and recommendations on the development of media literacy strategies

Let me be clear, media literacy is an important tool, but it needs to be combined with a healthy legal and functional environment for media in line with OSCE commitments and international standards. Legal frameworks need to provide journalists with a safe and free working environment, including unhindered access to information.

In Armenia we enjoy a constructive co-operation with the authorities and during my today's visit, we will have an opportunity to discuss the areas pertinent to freedom of expression and media freedom.

Media and information literacy requires continuous engagement of many partners. Only through joint and constructive efforts, we will be able to protect the public from the negative consequences information disorders in Armenia and in the whole OSCE region. My Office stands ready to support Armenia and provide expert policy recommendations, as well as to facilitate participation of experts in any related discussions and initiatives.

Thank you all for your attention and let me wish you fruitful discussions.