



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
Dunja Mijatović

Council of Europe Conference of Ministers
Responsible for Media and Information Society
Belgrade, 7 November 2013

Address by Dunja Mijatović, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

Excellencies, Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the last three and a half years, since I took up my current position, I have had the possibility to address numerous events that aimed at bringing safety of journalists in the forefront of our attention.

Some of these events gave tribute to individual journalists who fell victims of violence because what they wrote exposed crimes in their society. Other events discussed safety of media workers in general, listing statistics and pointing out worsening trends.

I just came from the very useful panel discussion where my fellow panelists and participants debated how to address more efficiently the current threats to journalism. Many of my points below reflect the elements of this discussion.

Regardless of the specific focus, these occasions all served the same goal that we have here today: to remind us that an indispensable element of democracies has been under threat, that the safety of journalists is not improving, and that media professionals need our support.

Looking at my interventions in the last few months only; editorial offices are set on fire, bombs placed under journalist's car, media workers beaten, and in far too many countries murderers of journalists remain free.

It is a sad fact that on average only one in ten investigations into murders of journalists brings the perpetrators and masterminds to justice.

In many areas of the OSCE the authorities themselves directly threaten the safety of journalists:

Members of the media assaulted while reporting on public demonstrations, sometimes by the police; numerous journalists and bloggers repeatedly questioned or put in short-term detention.

Journalists imprisoned on fabricated charges of hooliganism or drug possession; imprisoned for revealing details of crimes that at the time of their writing were not classified.

It is unacceptable that it is possible today to convict journalists for life for doing their work. Lock them in a high security prison, in solitary confinement, for something that we all have the right to do – such as critical writing, opposing views, or exposing what they see as wrongdoings in the society.

Smaller scale threats that media workers encounter for doing their work also take place, with alarming frequency. Sometimes journalists get a phone call asking whether they know where their family members are. They receive a parcel bomb or a bullet with their photo attached to it; other times they are persistently followed or being watched.

These are real threats against real journalists, people with names and families. These are all cases that I have reacted on and documented in my reports.

IF WE DO NOT STAND UP against these threats, we risk silencing these and other brave voices.

In many countries media freedoms and freedom of expression are also limited through blocking or restricting access to the Internet, through more traditional forms of censorship, through poorly drafted legislation or legislation designed to restrict freedoms rather than to foster them. I strongly believe that free speech should never be subject to criminal prosecution. However less than a quarter of Council of Europe member States have so far

decriminalized defamation. Unfortunately I am also seeing criminal laws or legislation designed to fight terrorism used to restrict media freedoms and freedom of expression, journalists followed, watched, or their communications monitored.

With the development of technology and social media journalism is constantly evolving. My office must also keep up with the developments and the impact they are having on media freedom and freedom of expression. This is why next year I am launching a debate between experts and governments on Open Journalism.

Open Journalism relies on user-generated content and encourages readers to contribute and shape the news-making process. Contrary to traditional journalism, Open Journalism does not just distribute a finished news/information product, but provides the audience with the opportunity to contribute to and shape news development based on the needs, interests and knowledge of the readers

I want to improve the awareness and understanding of Open Journalism by the relevant stakeholders, and to stimulate debate on policy implications relating to Open Journalism.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope that all of us here today would agree that improving safety of journalists is NOT about singling them out or placing them on a pedestal above other professions. Journalists have an essential role as public watchdogs, providing us with the information about issues that directly affect our lives. They need special protection because their work is the foundation of every democratic society and free exchange of views can help reduce tensions and prevent conflicts.

So we need to ask ourselves again and again: are we making practical, systemic progress on this issue? Do journalists have reasons to feel safer today than they did for example a year ago?

In the OSCE area, which includes all member States of the Council of Europe, the answer today, as it has been for years, remains NO.

What can we do to improve this bleak situation?

Governments have a **KEY ROLE** in bringing about the much needed change. While political commitments to protect media freedom are important, without their effective and timely implementation they remain words on paper. It is only when politicians put the necessary political will behind the commitments that they can change the situation.

Unfortunately today, the political leadership and the will to turn these commitments into reality is missing in many OSCE countries. Many governments continue to regard independent media as dangerous. Many believe that the media need to be controlled and sometimes even silenced.

As a result, it has become a commonplace that many governments disregard the very commitments that they have spent years drafting, debating, and voluntarily adopting.

This is unfortunately widespread.

It is disappointing that the countries with longer democratic traditions often fail to set a good example. Apart from the danger of eroding their own democratic institutions, by disregarding their commitments to free media and free expression these countries sets a bad example to those states who are currently trying to cement their own democratic traditions.

We as representatives of international organizations that have been given a mandate by our countries to help them uphold the principles they have voluntarily signed up to have the responsibility not only to pinpoint worrisome trends wherever they are and to keep up and increase the pressure for things to improve.

We are already working closely together in many fields. Council of Europe declarations and resolutions remain an important point of reference in my Office's efforts to improve safety of journalists. I warmly welcome the recent Decision by the Committee of Ministers' Deputies to deepen our co-operation by sharing information with my Office on issues related to Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights.

Only by persistently and tirelessly working together with our, in your case 47, in mine 57 countries, can we change things for the better.

Thank you for your attention.