



Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting
**Freedom of the Media: Protection of Journalists and Access
to Information**

Vienna, 13-14 July 2006

Closing remarks by Ambassador Bertrand de Crombrughe
Chairman of the OSCE Permanent Council

Thank you very much Mr. Chairman.

Freedom of the media is one of the priorities of the Belgian OSCE Chairmanship. Recognizing the important work of your office, Mr. Chairman, we felt that it deserved more visibility than it already had. Hence, we proposed freedom of the media as a topic for this Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting.

And I believe that this meeting led to our projected result thanks to the excellent organization by you and your staff, in co-operation with the ODIHR and Conference Services. My gratitude also goes to the moderators and the interpreters who always deliver an outstanding job here in the Hofburg.

The real quality of a meeting lies of course in its substance. And your choice of speakers was on target, Mr. Chairman. This was exemplified by the keynote speech of Mrs. Callamard and many of the other introductory speeches. They encouraged a genuine debate on the political commitments in light of the sometimes hard realities on the ground, and that is exactly what we should be discussing in these meetings. In the wake of new terrorist threats and technological evolutions, the climate in which the media is operating vis-à-vis public authorities appears indeed to have become increasingly challenging. Discussions showed that the difficulties that the media faces are geographically widely spread over the whole OSCE area, instead of being concentrated ‘east or west of Vienna’, and thus showcased that the OSCE deals with ‘compliance for all’ everywhere.

Yet beyond highlighting problems, the speakers also handed us suggestions and examples of how these deficiencies could be remedied. For instance, Pol Deltour explained to us –based on the Belgian experience- how legislation on protection of sources can ensure that the public receives more information than the limited information that is deliberately communicated by public authorities and societal heavyweights. Protection of journalistic sources laws make it possible for the public to find out about corruption, environmental problems etc. so they can hold those responsible accountable. Aside from suggested solutions, we also learned that a number of OSCE participating States have improved their legislation in the past years, notably on access to information. In this respect, we all look forward to the answers to the ‘Access to Information’ questionnaire that was distributed by the Representative on Freedom of the Media and the lessons that can be learned from this very useful exercise.

In sum, in spite of the many problems and challenges ahead, there is also reason for some optimism.

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Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear colleagues and friends,

An important conclusion from this meeting is that all human rights and fundamental freedoms are closely interlinked. No checks and balances in a democratic society, no free and fair elections, no freedom of opinion and expression without a flourishing, pluralistic and free media. Free media is a building block and a catalyst for a whole range of human rights.

That's not just theory, it's also practice, as was frequently highlighted throughout the debates over the past two days. Media professionals never operate in a vacuum. Instead, they often create an important link between civil society and governments and are rightly perceived that way by many.

So free media boosts human rights. But the impact of the media on society as a whole also makes us aware that the work of journalists entails certain responsibilities. These should be ensured in all liberty by the media itself. Voluntary professional standards or self-regulatory systems can promote increased professionalism, accuracy and adherence to ethical standards among journalists, without in any way endangering the freedom of expression and opinion.

Media practitioners should develop their own professional guidelines, thus also avoiding government interference. The session of this morning proved how important it is to continue the debate on the different and complex aspects of this reality. In fact, holding this session was an implementation of the Chairmanship's Perception Paper on Values Related to Free Media.

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We all agree that freedom of the media is front and centre. But what if the media simply doesn't have the capacity to function in a decent way, let alone be free? For media to be effectively and efficiently free, it also needs to be effective and efficient in itself. That requires money, people, training, *bref*; media development. The need for this kind of capacity building is recognized by the Belgian Chairmanship, and we will consult with delegations, OSCE institutions and Field Operations and civil society actors on what the OSCE could do more to support the media, for instance through stimulating peer-to-peer exchanges via media twinning initiatives.

Mr. Chairman, this meeting was rich with ideas, and the Belgian Chairmanship, through consultations with the participating States, will do everything that lies in its power to ensure an appropriate follow up to the many recommendations made during these two days.

Allow me to end with thanking the participants for their presence at this meeting. In the provisional list of participants I counted over 82 delegates from participating States, 15 OSCE Field Operations, 7 international organizations and no less than 102 civil society representatives.

A special thanks to all of you for coming and I hope that you can go home with valuable new insights and a broader network of contacts to continue your endeavours in this important field.

Thank you very much.