



9th South Caucasus Media Conference

From traditional to online media: best practices and perspectives

**Tbilisi, Georgia
11-12 October 2012**

Opening Speech by Dunja Mijatović

**Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,
Colleagues and Friends,**

It is a great pleasure to welcome you all to the opening of our 9th South Caucasus Media Conference.

Each year it is a special honour for me to welcome journalists, representatives of the media and civil society and academics from all three countries of the South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

I would like to thank all of you who have come to our conference to discuss topical media-freedom issues. This annual event has become a most important occasion for my Office. Most importantly, it serves as a unique forum for all of us to get together to maintain professional and personal contacts.

I would like to thank our host, Georgia, for generously hosting our conference for the 9th time, as well as the authorities of Armenia and Azerbaijan for working with my Office on conference preparations.

I would also like to thank the international and regional experts who have joined us.

I highly appreciate the hard work carried out by OSCE field Offices in Baku and in Yerevan, whose support and assistance made this conference possible.

My thanks also go to the governments of Germany, Lithuania, Norway, Switzerland and the United States for financially supporting this conference.

This year we came again to Tbilisi to discuss new developments in the field of online media. On the first day of our conference today we will discuss the new developments and explore what is the “cutting edge” of this rapidly expanding industry.

The need to stay in touch and be online – to be connected – grows stronger every day in our competitive, information-based societies.

But most importantly from our point of view, these new technologies provide a wonderful opportunity for everyone to capture and report on the world

around us. Everyone can and has become an observer and monitor of the contemporary events around us.

It has become difficult to say who is a journalist and who is not a journalist these days so, what I do is I choose not to – and it doesn't matter because for me and my Office because we work under the principle that every person has a right to freely express himself and we will defend everyone whose rights has been violated. The role I am performing is challenged by governments because some, too many in my view, are trying to define who is and who is not a journalist in order to give me guidance on whom to protect and not protect.

At this conference you will also have an opportunity to hear more about the notions of citizen-media and grassroots journalism, to discuss legal challenges and issues pertaining to the Internet-content regulation, look closely into Estonia's experience with e-government tools, as well to explore tendencies in development of digital media and self-regulation mechanisms.

I would like to use this opportunity to appeal to participating States in the South Caucasus to ensure that the online media, like traditional media, remains an open and public forum for public debate – in line with the OSCE commitments and international free-expression standards; provide an enabling environment for an independent and pluralistic media; introduce

laws that will foster media freedom and not restrict it; foster the free flow of information across national borders, permit unhindered access to the Internet and promote Internet literacy and self-regulation.

OSCE participating States have a lot on their agenda. We are raising these issues almost daily with the 56 participating States of the OSCE. Hardly a week passes when I don't have to raise my voice to remind them about the commitments they voluntarily agreed upon.

Tomorrow, experts from South Caucasus will discuss developments in social media, the transforming of traditional media to online media, as well as general media developments in their respective countries. Presentations will describe the situation regarding the use of social media tools in traditional and online media, as well as the role that social and community media play in their countries. This is a session that I'm really looking forward to listen to you. I want to learn about the problems you are facing because there are issues that we miss and need to hear about from you.

My Office continues to follow the media-freedom situation in the South Caucasus and I continue to raise my concerns on issues with the authorities including the continuing government control over broadcast media and the difficult access to governmental information.

Unfortunately, it is still not safe to be a journalist in this region, where journalists are harassed physically and hit with lawsuits and humiliating smear campaigns.

Journalists are blackmailed, beaten and put behind bars.

This is unacceptable and I will continue to raise my voice to remedy this situation. No one should be punished or put behind bars for articles they have written or reports they have broadcast.

It is a high time for the authorities stop regarding the media as a dangerous platform that needs to be controlled or silenced. The time has come for these authorities to realize that this attitude toward the media can only weaken the much cherished democratic principles that all of our societies should be based on. The time has also come to finally consider the media for what it is: an essential and unique tool of our democracies that allows for every citizen to live an informed life.

Of course all of this sounds ideal and we are very much aware of the fact that we do not live in an ideal world. That is the situation we are facing in the 21st century in countries that calling themselves democratic.

Countries making efforts to obstruct the freedom and independence of their media are only contributing to the downfall of their societies' democratic foundation.

I look forward to our discussion on these matters and trust that at the end of the conference we will adopt a declaration which will be forwarded to the authorities in all three countries I hope that the declaration recommendations will serve as a framework for the follow-up activities by the governments, as well as the OSCE and civil society.

I wish you all an interesting and fruitful conference and I look forward to hearing from you also outside this room about the problems that you are facing in your countries.

Thank you very much.