



EU-Western Balkans Media Days

Keynote speech of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

17 September 2018

Mr. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev,
Commissioner Johannes Hahn,
Minister Damjan Mancevski,
Ambassador Clemens Koja, Head of OSCE Mission to Skopje,
Excellencies,
Dear Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to be here with you today. Allow me to thank Commissioner Johannes Hahn and the European Commission for organizing this important event for such a distinguished group of political leaders, experts and participants from the region.

It is a great pleasure to be back in Skopje at a time of so many transformations and expectations for the future of the country. These transformations also include the field of media freedom, and for more than one year we have established a new and very constructive dialogue with Prime Minister Zaev and his government. I am glad to note that freedom of the media continues to be high on the list of priorities of the government. And I am particularly happy that very important reforms are transforming and opening the media landscape. We will continue to provide support and assistance.

I praise our cooperation with the European Union and with Commissioner Hahn in promoting media freedom in the region; and I am pleased to see that freedom of the media is among the EU's priorities during the accession process.

Freedom of the media is a fundamental human right and the cornerstone of every democratic system. It is the right of citizens to receive pluralistic information which shapes public opinion on numerous topics that directly affect their lives and well-being. Media holds people

in power accountable, it protects our democratic values, it allows different voices to be heard, and it safeguards our human rights and liberties.

This is why we need to ensure that journalists are safe and free to do their jobs, to investigate, to report and disclose wrongdoings.

At the beginning I would like to give you a brief assessment of the general media freedom situation in the Western Balkans as I can see it from my role as the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.

Since my appointment in July 2017, I have intervened more than 40 times on numerous cases both publicly and in direct communication with the authorities.

I have also had the opportunity to pay an official visit to most of the countries in the region. These visits, in which I met with civil society and journalists organisations as well as with authorities, gave me a first-hand picture of the media freedom situation. I was also able to hear many local perspectives.

The Western Balkans has seen tangible progress compared with ten years ago, but at the same time there is still a long road ahead.

What is still clearly missing in many States is a strong political will to support and protect the media and their diversity, and to accept the critical role of the media as a watchdog of democracy. On many occasions, authorities deny or try to minimize a poor media freedom situation, very often comparing it to their neighbours. While media freedom can be a good field to compete, I am afraid that too often discussions on the issue are mainly about bad examples next door.

At the same time, in many of the States, journalists are still harassed and threatened for their reporting. This is why safety of journalists is my 1st priority.

In May, in Podgorica, Olivera Lakić was shot in front of her home. This horrific attack aimed to frighten her and intimidate her colleagues not to continue their investigative journalism. I am extremely happy that she is well enough to join us here today and I sincerely hope that Olivera and her colleagues from Vijesti will continue with their work.

Unfortunately this was not an isolated incident of threats and physical attacks on a journalist. Just a few weeks ago the house of Klodiana Lala's parents in Albania was riddled with bullets from an automatic weapon. Journalist Vladimir Kovačević from Bosnia and Herzegovina was badly beaten. We must never forget that there are still several cases of killed journalists which have not been resolved. Impunity is an obstacle to journalists' safety and constitutes a second crime against them.

During my visits I heard time and again that the laws and regulations pertaining to the media in South East Europe are good. However, the implementation of these laws is far from perfect. At the moment, my Office is closely working with Montenegro and with local authorities here in Skopje on reviewing parts of their media legislations. We are also working to assist Serbia in preparing the new media strategy.

I want to use this opportunity to welcome the engagement by these States. But we will have, together with them, to pay as much attention to the implementation as to the legislation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As part of my Office's long-term strategy, in May we organized the 5th Annual South East Europe Media Conference in Struga. At this conference we heard of participants' numerous personal and professional experiences. From all these discussions and country visits we have drawn a series of recommendations and I would like to highlight just a few:

1 - First on the safety of journalists:

Any attacks or threats against investigative journalism should sound an alarm to the authorities who must ensure that journalists work in a safe and secure environment. That is why I want to insist on the concrete following recommendations on this issue:

- 1) Politicians and public officials must not create a hostile environment for the media through their statements and actions;
- 2) Any threat to media or journalists must be taken seriously and investigated;
- 3) Impunity is not an option for democracies. Perpetrators and masterminds of crimes against the media must be brought to justice;
- 4) Governments need to allocate adequate human and financial resources to investigations. Law enforcement, prosecutors and judges must be made aware of the necessity to treat attacks against journalists as a high priority and work with journalists' organisations;
- 5) Special attention must be paid to the issue of safety of female journalists who face additional threats including online.

2 – On the working conditions of journalists and the economic situation of the press:

For journalists, safety can also mean employment safety. Journalists in the region face very grave problems when it comes to safeguarding their employment and social rights. It is obvious that journalists who are not secure when it comes to their employment, lack independence.

There is a need to strengthen the role of the journalists unions in ensuring collective rights. In many cases, media outlets themselves are under economic pressure. They face unfair markets, politically controlled advertising, financial and tax inspections.

There is a need for more transparency when it comes to media funding, especially when funding comes from the State and public bodies; and a need for transparency of media ownership.

3 - On the Public Service Media:

It's clear that there is a need for both restructuring and investing in all public media in the region to ensure their political independence and financial sustainability. The governing bodies and staff must be selected on the basis of their professional qualities and not party loyalty. Public service media must also be at the forefront of fostering investigative journalism. They should support innovative ways to engage their audience. Sustainable financing, modernisation through investment and training of personal, and clear provisions in the law to ensure independence, are key for the future of Public Service Media.

This should also be applied to the broadcast and media regulatory agencies, which need to be free from political interference and be guaranteed fair conditions for the development of the media landscape.

4- On self-regulation mechanism:

We also discussed the challenges of transforming the current self-regulatory models to the online environment.

Self-regulation can be an important tool to raise professional and ethical standards. Journalists' Codes of Ethics should reflect the changing media landscape, and every effort should be made to ensure their consistent implementation.

The sustainability of Press Councils should be a priority for the media community given their essential role in facilitating media self-regulation.

Digital literacy strategies are important to ensure that journalists and media actors as well as the public are able to effectively engage in media self-regulation.

Technological advances can foster the democratization of the media, expanding the possibilities for self-expression and delivering news faster to broader audiences.

However technology has also brought about challenges when it comes to assessing credibility and accuracy of information.

This means that journalists and the media need to continue focusing on quality rather than fast delivery.

Credible research and facts should be the basis of all journalism and media should continue to strengthen their credibility through fact-checking, particularly online.

When it comes to dealing with the phenomena of "fake news" it is important that States do not adopt legal bans on "fake news" as they are counterproductive and prone to abuse.

Existing laws, including civil defamation laws, provide adequate legal remedies for the dissemination of false information which harm reputation.

The best way to counter disinformation is by creating a free, independent and diverse communication environment and a media literate society.

This is also the best way to strengthen our societies and democracies, especially at a time when our human rights and fundamental freedoms are under attack.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We need to protect and support journalists, bloggers and other media professionals who are literally risking their lives and livelihoods to bring us stories, challenge prejudices, and break down walls and barriers.

For all of these reasons, journalists and media workers deserve our strongest and continuous respect and support, and I am looking forward to our discussions during this conference.

Thank you.