

17TH SOUTH CAUCASUS MEDIA CONFERENCE
***Media Freedom and Access to Information for Resilient Societies: Challenges
and Ways Forward***

18-19 November 2020

*Closing remarks by Jürgen Heissel, Director, Office of the OSCE Representative
on Freedom of the Media*

Thank you all for your active participation and interest in the discussions.

Thank you especially to our speakers for your important contributions.

I was glad to see that the conference continues to be a platform that allows journalists, experts, civil society, and government representatives to exchange views on the state of freedom of expression and freedom of the media across the region.

During the conference, whilst looking at developments over the past year in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, we have come to acknowledge that several obstacles to media freedom, unfortunately, continue to persist.

We clearly showed that the safety of journalists, access to information, the free flow of information, and pluralistic and diverse media are not privileges.

On the contrary, they are necessary conditions for transparency, accountability, and democracy.

As our daily experience and this conference have shown:
these conditions become particularly vital in times of health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when the stakes to protect human health and safety are great.

In this regard, I think we can all agree that there is more work to be done.

Governments, for one, must fully ensure the right of journalists and the ability of media outlets to fulfil their profession and activities in a free, and safe, manner.

As highlighted by our experts, the regulatory measures imposed in response to the pandemic should be a matter of public discussion.

Such measures cannot be immune from constructive criticism to find new, and more effective, ways of fighting the pandemic.

In addition, the authorities should make sure that any countermeasures live up to the international standards on human rights.

They must comply, in particular, with the principles of legality and proportionality, and must not impose excessively intrusive measures, like automated emotion recognition and widespread surveillance.

Importantly, it was also recommended that the emergency measures, which are intended for a specific cause, should not become permanent.

On our part, the Office of the RFoM will continue using all available tools to assist the participating States in fulfilling their OSCE commitments on freedom of expression and freedom of the media.

We will also continue to support all relevant stakeholders, including reporters, experts, regulators and members of civil society, in advancing media freedom.

I am grateful to the authorities of all three countries for working with our Office in preparation of this conference.

I would also like to once more express my gratitude to the Government of the Netherlands for providing financial support.

Special thanks to our guest from Ukraine, Antonina Cherevko, for joining us and sharing her views and expertise.

Last but not least, I thank our interpreters whose work was key to enabling communication during these two days, and to my excellent team in Vienna who made this event happen.

Thank you, stay safe and healthy, and see you next year (hopefully in person)!