

2020 OSCE Annual Police Experts Meeting

Police and the Media: Co-operation in Public Interest

28 September 2020, Vienna, Hofburg

CONCEPT PAPER

I. INTRODUCTION

The 2020 OSCE Annual Police Experts Meeting (APEM)¹ will be dedicated to recent developments, opportunities and challenges for the police in working with the media and journalists.²

Revolutionary developments in technology and communications in the last decades have induced societal changes in a number of ways, not least in the area of public relations and co-operation with the media. With the introduction of the internet, social media platforms and smartphones, people can access news wherever and whenever they choose. Digitalization and new communication technologies, have allowed the media to become a two-way participatory medium through which people connect, communicate, discuss and share information.

In the past, the polices' engagement in working with the media was mainly limited to providing information to journalists who wrote news aimed to the media consumers. Today, the police are increasingly making use of the diverse new opportunities by directly communicating information and news to the public as well as receiving and analysing feedbacks. The police, like other official agencies, have had to develop their competencies and make reforms to follow and make use of this new reality of public relations and the media.

The OSCE broad approach to security encompasses politico-military security, including law enforcement, economic and environmental security, and human security. These three security dimensions are of equal importance. The police and the media have different but vital roles in modern societies in achieving and preserving security and public safety. Mutual respect and recognition of roles and responsibilities of police officers and journalists benefits all.

¹ The Annual Police Experts Meeting is organized in accordance with article 4 of the OSCE Ministerial Council Decision No. 9 of 4 December 2001 MC(9).DEC/9, which calls upon the OSCE to "...convene as appropriate and preferably annually meetings of police experts from OSCE participating States, and representatives of other relevant specialized international and regional organizations".

² See OSCE Strategic Framework on Police-Related Activities: PC.DEC/1049 of 26 July 2012 endorsed by MC.DEC/4/12 of 7 December 2012. See also OSCE MC.DEC 3/18 of 7 December 2018 on Safety of Journalists.

The 2020 APEM will address these developments, especially focusing on the following topics, which are identified and essential for an appropriate, fair and professional relationship between the police and the media:

1. Organizational changes and developments of skills and competencies within the police in public relations and media communications;
2. Police and the social media, opportunities and challenges;
3. Police-media relations in crisis situations and during high-risk events.

II. OBJECTIVE AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The main objective of 2020 APEM is to present and discuss challenges and examples of co-operation in police-media relations. A special focus will be on lessons learned and good practices as well as to identify new opportunities and ways for the police in police-public relations through both traditional and social media network platforms, including the operational relationship. The main findings and outcomes of the meeting will be compiled in a report which will serve as a basis for further discussions on its topics at the national, regional and international levels and as guidance for the OSCE when developing and providing capacity-building and technical assistance to the OSCE participating States and Partners for Co-operation.

III. STRUCTURE OF THE MEETING

The 2020 APEM is organized by the Albanian OSCE Chairmanship with the support of the OSCE Secretariat's Transnational Threats Department/Strategic Police Matters Unit in coordination with the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM). The Meeting is open to law enforcement experts and other criminal justice practitioners, OSCE Delegations, representatives of the media, representatives of regional and international organizations, technical specialists, researchers as well as civil society representatives from the OSCE participating States and Partners for Co-operation.

After a formal opening and welcoming remarks, the meeting will be divided into three main sessions. The first session will "set the scene" in police-media relations during the last years and introduce selected good-practice examples on how police services have developed internal competencies and organizational structures in media relations and public communications (topic 1). The second session will discuss new developments, opportunities and challenges for the police in working with and making use of social network services and platforms (topic 2). The third and final session will be dedicated to police-media relations in crisis situations, emergency incidents and during high-risk events (topic 3).

IV. BACKGROUND

The following paragraphs outline some background information for each of the main topics of the 2020 APEM mentioned above.

1. Organizational changes, and developments of skills and competencies of the police in public relations and media communications

In their efforts to share information and increase public confidence as well as preventing and reducing crime, many police agencies have established specialized public relations and media units as a part of their internal organizational structures. These units are usually staffed by experts in media communications approaches or public relations and are directly engaged in media

activities, such as news stories, interviews, and image promotion. Communications via diverse media platforms and techniques have become an integral part of policing and some have even argued that the modern police have become a media organization. These developments have given rise to organizational changes and developments of new skills and competencies within the police.

2. Police and the social media; opportunities and challenges

Visible presence of the police is paramount in an environment where people engage with each other, not only physically but also virtually. Informing people of the incurring police tasks and emphasizing that the police is acting in the public interest, results in the perception of a more positive image of the police with the community whilst delivering an increased sense of public safety. Social media platforms have not only provided new tools for the police to directly engage the public, but also to better detect crime and criminals. On the other hand, targeted disinformation channeled through social media can inflict harm to public order, as well as generate distrust towards law-enforcement and feelings of insecurity among the public. Transparency of the police work and its respect for human rights, including freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly, as well as media privileges, is a principal way to counteract false and misleading messages, and avoid their actual and/or potential harm to society.

3. Police and the media during crisis situations and emergency incidents

Communication between police, media organizations and journalists is crucial in situations of crisis, during catastrophic events or even in the course of highly complex and important investigations. Thus, it is necessary to improve cooperation of police and media in this particular and sensitive field. Clear strategies and practices enable the police to provide objective and factual information and fulfill their important communication functions during high-risk situations. Considering widespread public access to social media, their platforms are increasingly becoming the preferred strategy for directly communicating critical information to the public, especially in emergency and crisis situations and also for the public to have direct access to such information.

The OSCE Representatives on Freedom of the Media have deplored incidents where media workers are harshly treated or obstructed by the law enforcement from covering public protests. As the media play an important watchdog role, journalists and other media workers should enjoy unhindered and safe access to public events at all times, including when covering demonstrations, catastrophic events and public emergency incidents.