



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
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**Keynote Speech
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Your Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates of PEN International
Dear Representatives and Partners in Civil Society
and Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to address such a distinguished international audience here at the 80th PEN International Congress. It is the first ever PEN International Congress in this region and I commend the host country Kyrgyzstan for its openness and warm hospitality that my Office has so often experienced when organizing international and regional events.

When we all gather here under the theme “My language, my story, my freedom,” we do it in a country and in a region in which these words play very important roles.

And the right to tell your story brings me to my mandate as the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.

For many of you, in particular participants that come from the Southern Hemisphere, my institution might not be so familiar. The Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe functions like a watchdog over the 57 nations that comprise it on matters of free media and free expression. Over the past 40 years, beginning with the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, these nations have promised to hold themselves to the highest

standards in fostering freedom. It is my responsibility to point out when they have succeeded and where they have failed.

Behind the establishment of my Office stands the conviction that security, peace and stability are directly interrelated to the observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, in particular the rights of free expression and free media.

The underpinning notion being that free media and free expression are essential components of a secure, peaceful world.

Literature, free speech and free media are a “common currency,” as the PEN Charter puts it, through which we connect and reach out to each other, through which we learn about the other side of the coin and learn to bridge divides.

Unfortunately we tend to forget the lessons of history and how important it is to maintain this free flow of information and this free and independent media environment.

To be a journalist, a writer, is, unfortunately, still a hazardous profession. After five years of observing the media freedom situation in the OSCE participating States, it is appalling to me that telling a story and conveying a message is a dangerous activity in many of our nations.

I have seen the assault on free expression over these five years as Representative and they fall in the following categories:

- violence and threats of violence against journalists,
- obstruction of critical reporting by the authorities, both in traditional media and online, and
- legislative restrictions limiting the ways critical opinions can be accessed or expressed.

I urge you to look at the our Office’s website and sign up for our online alerts to see the number of serious issues we address daily, such as death threats, harassment, deportation, imprisonment, beating, disappearances, abductions and even murders.

While assaults are observed across the OSCE region, in no country has the safety of journalists become more critical than in Ukraine. I believe it is appropriate to say a few words about the situation there.

At least 6 journalists have lost their lives. Scores have been kidnapped and held hostage. Fear prevails throughout eastern Ukraine.

This crisis exemplifies the fact that a deterioration of media freedom and the rise of propaganda often go together to escalate conflict.

Propaganda is being used to polarize and separate people from each other in a “we-against-them” mentality that appeals to our baser instincts.

I believe the most effective method to fight propaganda is to promote an open, diverse and dynamic media environment.

While the issues at the fore in Ukraine are indeed a dark reminder for all of us about how quickly the media freedom landscape can darken, they are not the only challenges we face as advocates of free media and free expression.

Allow me to touch on additional issues of concern.

As our recent session illuminated so well, prison remains an option to be used against dissident voices across the world.

There is no room in prison for those whose only crime is to speak their convictions. But, indeed, as much as we try, the campaign to decriminalize defamation moves at a glacial pace. In some nations dreadful backsliding has taken place, where government officials and inanimate objects (such as flags or other symbols) have special privileges against dissent.

Politicians, always mindful of using obtuse language, now adopt laws that criminalize the distribution of “false information,” leaving that vague phrase to be defined by judges in courts that are beholden to ruling parties. The real crime is that these laws are still on the books.

These laws today are not only restricted to criticism of public figures. East and West of Vienna, the headquarters of the OSCE, nations have rushed to pass laws that criminalize extremist acts and speech that threatens national security, without seriously considering what extremism and national security mean. These laws can and are being used to harass dissenters – those who dissent with the ruling classes.

Across the globe there is growing recognition that our privacy is being invaded – by governments and non-state actors – at a level heretofore deemed impossible. In an effort to fight the legitimate threat of terrorism, governments have exploited personal data on all of us, indiscriminately violating our rights in an effort to find a needle in a haystack.. I don't have to express an opinion on whether such data mining is legal or good policy. I can tell you it is wrong to threaten to punish those whose crime is to bring to the public's attention these invasive activities.

The British authorities' actions against the Guardian, including the demand that its staff destroy electronics in their possession containing information on US data-collection efforts or face criminal prosecution, is a chilling reminder that in this new world, it is dangerous to be even a messenger of information.

Let me leave you today with this thought.

Much of the discussion here today centered on disturbing and bad news. But that is the nature of our business and our lives. We are protectors of and proponents for freedom. It is quite natural to be on the defensive because across the world there are institutional forces that oppose free expression and free media.

There are success stories. We know that. And the past 25 years have brought truly unbelievable changes to many places in the world, including right here in Kyrgyzstan, where in 1990 I doubt that we'd be holding this meeting and having this discussion.

Thank you.