



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media



Conference Outcomes

The OSCE South East Europe Media Conference (SEEMC) “Journalism in times of crisis”, held in a hybrid format in Tirana on 11-12 October 2021, was co-organized by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM) and the OSCE Presence in Albania, with the support of other OSCE field operations in the region. The two-day event gathered over 150 participants from across the journalistic field, as well as media and legal experts, State actors and researchers operating in the region and beyond.

Participants delved into discussions on old and new interlocking challenges that continue to strain the safety of, and public trust in, journalists in South East Europe. Reflecting on the current state of affairs of media freedom and freedom of expression in the region, special attention was paid to the role of governments and the media community in safeguarding journalism as an essential public good and a pillar of democratic societies in today’s fast-paced digital world, within the context of the COVID-19 health crisis. Participants further shared their experiences and touched upon ongoing reforms and best practices towards enhancing the economic, legal and physical safety of journalists in the region.

Considering the importance of young voices in the public sphere, the conference engaged young journalists who shared their perspectives on the most pertinent media freedom issues

and provided forward-looking solutions to improve the situation of journalists in the region. The conference also touched upon the distinct professional challenges and gender-specific risks that women journalists face in the media sector. In this light, participants shared their personal and professional experiences, and provided their insight on how to ensure gender-balanced newsrooms and strengthen the working conditions of women journalists in the region.

The conclusions presented in this report are based on the panel session discussions.

Session I: Disinformation and Quality Investigative Journalism

While the COVID-19 health crisis has caused tremendous challenges across sectors, it has demonstrated the essential role of professional quality journalism in providing accurate, fact-checked and timely information to enhance transparency, accountability and public trust, and thereby debunk disinformation. Panellists in this session discussed the various facets of the disinformation issue and the complexities in countering it in today's fast-paced digital world – which makes it easier and faster to spread unverified information and unprofessional reporting on a far-reaching scale.

Panellists concluded that disinformation not only poses a threat to journalists' safety, but also threatens the media ecosystem in which they operate, by compelling independent media to divert their precious resources from reporting to debunking "fake news" amidst growing financial pressure.

Among the main proposals, panellists stressed the need to apply a combination of remedies, including strengthened implementation of self-regulatory mechanisms, enhanced access to public information, and development of fact-checking, media and digital literacy programs for both journalists and the wider public.

Panel conclusions:

- Strengthen the application of self-regulatory mechanisms to preserve journalism standards and therefore ensure professional quality reporting across all communication channels, particularly in the online sphere. Efforts should be made for their consistent implementation;
- Ensure that any government measures taken to limit the effects of disinformation or hate speech do not disproportionately limit freedom of expression and the media as prescribed in international human rights law;
- Encourage holistic multi-stakeholder co-operation involving journalists, media organizations, academia and public officials to combat disinformation, pressure on the media and restrictions on access to information;

- Develop training and promote education in the area of fact-checking, media and digital literacy for journalists and the public as important remedies in countering the spread of disinformation and hate speech, as well as ensuring quality, independent and credible media. Holistic multi-stakeholder interventions are needed to build resilience to disinformation;
- Enhance funds for professional investigative journalism to ensure their financial sustainability and quality reporting as a means to counter disinformation;
- Reaffirm that access to timely and accurate public information is an essential mechanism in helping journalists gather facts and data necessary to fulfil their professional function, and therefore ensure a more informed and active citizenry, as well as transparent and accountable governments.

Session II: Safety and Working Conditions of Journalists

Safety of journalists continues to be a major concern in the region, while the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the limitations of labour rights and working conditions of journalists, especially for women journalists, freelancers and independent local media outlets. In this session, journalists from across the region shared the various forms of threats they face while performing their journalistic activities, and the institutional gaps in safeguarding adequate protection in terms of their physical and economic safety.

Panellists highlighted the urgent need to step up efforts by law enforcement and judicial authorities, including through enhanced inter-institutional co-operation, to resolve crimes committed against journalists – both offline and online – in an effective and efficient manner. This is of utmost importance in order to prevent future attacks and end impunity, and therefore enable journalists to perform their democratic function in society without fear and undue pressure.

Panel conclusions:

- Full implementation of national legal frameworks and a policy of zero tolerance for physical and verbal attacks, threats and intimidation against journalists, including in political discourse and in the margins of public gatherings. Efforts should be directed towards amending existing national criminal codes to provide additional protection for journalists and media workers, such as introducing more stringent penalties and accelerated case processing, when exposed to attacks and threats due to the nature of their work;
- Strengthen institutional follow-up by law enforcement and judicial authorities, including through better inter-institutional co-operation, on all instances of physical and verbal violence against journalists. Efforts should be directed towards effectively and swiftly investigating, credibly solving and adequately sanctioning crimes against

journalists, both offline and online, by bringing all perpetrators and masterminds to justice;

- Establish specialized, designated units and registers in public prosecutor's offices and courts for investigations on cases involving crimes against journalists. Efforts should be made to promote training for prosecutors and judges on international human rights norms and safeguards to further improve the responses by judicial authorities, and thereby strengthen the protection of journalists;
- Strengthen multi-stakeholder dialogue and co-operation among journalists, media associations, academia, civil society and relevant authorities to reinforce and ensure safety of journalists;
- Enhance transparency and access to timely and reliable data on preventative and due process measures;
- Fully decriminalize defamation and ensure that defamation laws do not carry excessive sanctions or penalties that could undermine the safety of journalists;
- Implement labour laws and decent working conditions for journalists and media workers in order to enable independent and quality reporting and minimize the risk of self-censorship;
- Empower and enhance collaboration among trade unions and media associations to build media resilience, while fostering solidarity among those in the journalist profession to increase working and social rights.

Session III: Women Journalists and Women Media Managers

Ensuring both equal opportunities and equal safeguards for women and men is key to an independent and diverse media landscape, which is vital for open societies based on the principles at the heart of OSCE commitments to human rights and democracy. Promoting gender equality in the media sector is important to secure women's right to freedom of expression and their ability to provide a public service.

In this session, women journalists and media managers shared their professional and personal experiences, highlighting the gender imbalances mirrored particularly at the decision-making level, in both public and private media, and especially in local media. They also underscored the prevalence of gender-specific risks that women journalists face both inside their organizations, outside of them, and increasingly online.

To address the gender imbalance in the media industry, panellists exchanged empowering initiatives undertaken at the local level to raise awareness and promote gender-responsive representation and equal opportunities for women in the media sector.

Panel conclusions:

- Develop internal policies and mechanisms to prevent and effectively respond to gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace;
- Ensure women's inclusion in, and equal opportunity to access, senior and decision-making positions across public and private media as well as within media related public bodies;
- Reinforce gender-responsive media content across all channels, including television, print, radio and digital platforms;
- Ensure women's equal access to employment rights and benefits;
- Raising awareness on the importance of women journalists to pluralism and diversity;
- Establish mentorship opportunities for women journalists to empower and support them towards positive transformations of the media sector;
- Raise awareness on the gender-specific risks that women journalists face while performing their work, especially in the online sphere, to ensure gender-responsive safeguards by competent authorities.

Session IV: SLAPPs as an increasing threat to independent media

Journalists and media outlets in South East Europe and beyond are increasingly harassed legally with so-called Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs). SLAPPs are often based on groundless and excessive claims, and are deliberately initiated with the intention of draining the financial and psychological resources of media and of intimidating journalists into abandoning their investigations through lengthy and costly legal proceedings. One of the elements and characteristics of such lawsuits is the imbalance of power between the defendant – usually involving journalists instead of media outlets – and the plaintiff – often involving powerful businesspeople and public officials.

In this panel, panellists discussed the chilling effect of SLAPP suits on media freedom and freedom of expression, and provided insightful recommendations on how to tackle the harmful practice of such lawsuits through legislative changes and other protective and supportive measures.

Panel conclusions:

- Introduce appropriate procedural safeguards against SLAPPs by developing criteria, either through legal changes or case law, on the basis of which SLAPP suits can be dismissed at an early stage of proceedings;
- Provide supportive and protective measures, including financial assistance and free legal aid to journalists targeted by SLAPPs, to enable the effective exercise of the right of defence, also considering the financial imbalance between parties which often characterizes SLAPPs;

- Raise awareness on SLAPPs through training workshops in order to sensitize and build knowledge of both journalists and legal professionals, in particular judges and lawyers on how to deal with such lawsuits and the threat thereof;
- Public authorities and civil society need to engage in European anti-SLAPP efforts for legislative reforms at the national level;
- Encourage existing media freedom related platforms and organizations to document and map cases of SLAPPs targeting journalists and media outlets.

Session V: The future of journalism: Young perspectives on media

Participation of young journalists in the public sphere is not only essential for ensuring media pluralism but also for building inclusive and robust democratic societies. During this session, young journalists from the region presented their “Tirana Media Platform” paper outlining a set of solutions to pressing media freedom challenges from a youth perspective, in an effort to raise awareness and promote concerted action by journalists, international organizations and relevant authorities to respond to the issues at stake for a more favorable media environment, quality independent journalism and well-informed citizenry.

Eighteen young journalists from across South East Europe developed the Tirana Media Platform during the 2021 “Youth and Media in Focus” Youth Trail Camp edition, organized within the framework of the “YouthTrail: Promoting OSCE Values in the Western Balkans” flagship youth exchange programme by the OSCE Presence in Albania.

Panel conclusions:

- Establish sub-committees within journalist associations across the region with participation of young journalists;
- Engage young journalists in university lectures to share their insights and professional experiences with journalism students;
- Recognize the gender-specific threats and challenges that female journalists face and the need for continued awareness on the issue to further improve the protection of female journalists in the region;
- Reaffirm the importance of sustaining quality and independent journalism based on strong ethical standards;
- Enhance advocacy efforts by media organizations, civil society, academia and the international community to push for positive change and meaningful action by relevant authorities to support a free and conducive media environment;
- Advocate for the adoption of the Tirana Media Platform on youth and media in an effort to improve the working conditions and quality of media in the region.