



Organization for Security and
Co-operation in Europe
Mission to Skopje

**Remarks by the Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje Ambassador Nina Suomalainen
for the conference: “Professional media reporting – A prerequisite for free and fair
elections”**

Skopje, 6 April 2016

I realize that not too many things were left unsaid on the topic of media reforms in the lively discussions of the recent months and especially on the role of media before, during and after elections. We all know the vast importance that the media can and do play during elections. Everyone is competing to draw the attention to their political messaging and to increase the visibility of candidates and parties. In addition to providing a platform for political messages, the importance of media lies in its ability to stimulate discussion or dialogue and also in promoting political pluralism.

In the 18th century, the political philosopher Montesquieu described the tripartite separation of political powers among legislature, executive and judiciary power. There is also the fourth power, namely the media.

The media outlets should be aware of their role and responsibilities carried as a fourth power. While the media should respect the right of citizens to be informed in a timely and accurate manner, the role of media becomes even more crucial during the elections. The media is expected to cover elections in a fair, balanced, and unbiased manner. They should not favour anyone. In this way, they would contribute in providing a level playing field and an environment where citizens can choose freely. It might sound like a cliché, but accurate and impartial media reporting is absolutely crucial for an informed choice of citizens.

In this regard, the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report on the 2014 elections did note a number of shortcomings, including bias in terms of quantity and tone of coverage in most media outlets. The issues pointed out in OSCE/ODIHR's report should be addressed. The shortcomings should not be repeated, the recommendations must be followed. Serious efforts should be made in this direction.

Some might argue that the lack of political agreement in the recent few months on reforms aiming at more media freedom is a lost opportunity. Hours before the dissolution of the parliament, we should however focus on what can be done now, on how the tools at place can be effectively used.

And when I say tools, I mean the relevant legislation and the Code of Journalists. But most importantly, I mean the two recently adopted documents, the “*Charter of Ethical Election Reporting*”, signed by many media outlets and the “*Ethical and Professional principles of MRT for media coverage of election processes*”, adopted by the public broadcaster. Both initiatives should be commended.

However, in order to have a positive result, implementation is of paramount importance. This means that proper implementation of the relevant laws, including the Electoral Code is central to creating a level playing field for the upcoming elections. Professional integrity and

respect for the Code of Journalists, as well as adherence to the commitments undertaken by the signatories of the two documents I mentioned before is key to ensuring that self-regulation can be effective.

To sum up:

Our aim should be to have media outlets that report objectively and impartially and may serve their role as a public watchdog.

Our challenge is to have media outlets that manage to maintain a delicate balance between being consistent with their editorial policy while at the same time reporting in a fair and accurate manner and presenting differing views.

The way to achieve this is through proper implementation of the legislation and adherence to the professional and ethical standards.

Inspired by the title of this conference, I would like to conclude by saying that professional media reporting is not only a prerequisite for free and fair elections. The focus should not be on elections only. Professional media reporting is also a prerequisite for a democratic society and for an informed citizenship that can make choices based on accurate and objective information. The responsibility lies with all of us and all of you.