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**OSCE Permanent Council N° 1191
Vienna, 5 July 2018**

**EU Statement in Response to the Report by the OSCE
Representative on Freedom of the Media, Mr Harlem Désir**

The European Union warmly welcomes the Representative on Freedom of the Media, Mr Harlem Désir, to the Permanent Council and thanks him for his comprehensive report. Freedom of expression and media freedom remain top priorities for the EU, including in the OSCE. We find the relation to the concept of comprehensive security particularly important: there is a clear link between free expression and independent media, and open, peaceful and prosperous societies that contribute to our joint security.

The RFoM, as an autonomous institution, plays a key role in advocating and promoting full compliance with OSCE principles and commitments regarding freedom of expression and free media. The EU fully supports the mandate, which is flexible enough to respond to existing threats to freedom of expression and media freedom, online and offline, and to address new challenges. In particular, the early warning and rapid response function of the Representative is more important than ever, in light of the challenges and negative trends in many parts of the OSCE area. The interventions by the RFoM are a concrete way of supporting participating States, and often –though unfortunately not often enough – bring concrete results in terms of follow-up measures by governments. We reiterate our unequivocal support for the Representative's professional and dedicated work in exercising his mandate. We also support the RFoM's thematic work on issues such as propaganda and disinformation, voluntary media self-regulation, safety of female journalists, Open Journalism as well as the provision of legal reviews.

We welcome that the RFoM highlights issues across the region including in EU Member States, demonstrating that we cannot take media freedom and freedom of

expression for granted. No-one is immune to shortcomings in this field. We were all shocked by the recent murders of journalists in some of the EU Member States. In advancing the situation for media within the EU, Member States seek, along with strong support to full investigation of the cases, to engage fully with the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, and deeply appreciate these exchanges. The EU remains committed to cooperating with RFoM and making use of his recommendations and trust that other participating States do the same. Cooperation with the Office also implies providing it with the adequate resources to fulfill its mandate.

The EU shares many concerns raised by the RFoM in his report. We have joined his calls on the Russian Federation on a number of issues, from safety of journalists to legislative changes and judicial measures threatening freedom of expression online, including the blocking of the Telegram application, and the link between the foreign agents law and the media drafted in the new media law. The space for independent journalism in Russia regrettably continues to shrink. We note with concern that the increasing restrictions on free speech are mirrored by persistent Russian use of disinformation as a destabilising tool. This was evident in Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and remains so with Russia's destabilisation of eastern Ukraine and in other cases.

With regard to Ukraine, the RFoM has, among other things, reiterated that foreign media outlets and representatives should not be included on sanctions lists, following a Ukrainian decision regarding two information agencies. The EU encourages Ukraine to continue to work with the RFoM to address concerns and challenges. We shared the RFoM's concerns regarding Babchenko's case and insist on the importance that authorities provide credible information to the public. We remain deeply concerned with the dire situation for freedom of expression in Crimea and Sevastopol, illegally annexed by Russia, as well as in areas held by Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine. Echoing the RFoM, we call on Russia to release Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov and Ukrainian journalist Roman Sushchenko. We also call for the release of illegally detained Ukrainian blogger and journalist Stanislav Aseev, and welcome the commitment of both the Russian and Ukrainian journalists' unions to his freedom. The ongoing dialogue between Russian and Ukrainian journalists, through roundtables facilitated by the RFoM, remains important.

The EU joins RFoM's call on Turkey, where more than 150 journalists are still in jail, to respect freedom of the media and freedom of expression. We remain concerned about the prison sentences issued to the majority of the defendants in the Cumhuriyet trial, and in those of other journalists. We also echo the Representative's concerns regarding the trial against editor and human rights lawyer Eren Keskin as well as several journalists of a now closed Kurdish daily. We further share his concerns regarding shrinking space for online expression in Turkey. The EU will continue to follow on-going procedures against journalists and other media actors, as well as human rights defenders, academics, writers, members of the opposition, parliamentarians and others.

The EU remains concerned over the situation for media freedom in Belarus. Most recently the RFoM raised the adoption of new legislative amendments, which include a general ban on, among others, foreigners and foreign legal entities establishing media outlets in the country. Further, the amendments provide the Ministry of Information with strict control over all online resources. The EU also shares the RFoM's concerns about the repeated blocking of websites, including Charter97.org, and the penalties imposed on journalists working without accreditation in Belarus.

In much of Central Asia, the situation regarding freedom of expression remains serious. The RFoM has expressed concern over recent cases in the region, but also noted some positive developments. We welcome the steps taken by Uzbekistan to release journalists, including most recently Bobomurod Abdullaev and Khayotkhan Nasriddinov, and encourage Central Asian countries to further pursue efforts in this direction by fostering a safe and enabling environment for journalists to carry out their work independently and without undue interference.

We reiterate our concern about continued pressure put on bloggers and media workers in Azerbaijan. We share RFoM's concerns regarding the prison sentence against journalist Afgan Mukhtarli, and reiterate our call on Azerbaijan to release him immediately, as well as all bloggers and journalists prosecuted for carrying out their work. We also reiterate our call to the Georgian authorities to shed light on the circumstances of his kidnapping on the Georgian territory.

In the Western Balkans, political pressure, threats, violence and intimidation against

journalists remain an issue of concern. We call on our partners in the Western Balkans to follow the recommendations of the RFoM.

The conclusion after listening to the report of Mr Désir is simple: we all need to increase our efforts to implement all OSCE principles and commitments on freedom of expression and media freedom. We therefore welcome the initiative of the Italian Chairmanship to include Freedom of the Media as one of the specifically selected topics for the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting. We look forward to discussing these issues further within the OSCE, including in Warsaw, and including in view of the Ministerial Council in Milan. In conclusion, we once again thank the RFoM for his active engagement and dedication. Our thanks go also to his able team for their tireless work.

The Candidate Countries the FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO* and ALBANIA*, the Country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and Potential Candidate BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA, and the EFTA countries ICELAND and LIECHTENSTEIN, members of the European Economic Area, align themselves with this statement.

* The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.