

**Central Asia Media Conference  
8,9 November 2018  
Astana, Kazakhstan**

**Opening Speech – To be checked against delivery**

Mr. Minister Dauren Abaev,  
Mr. Ambassador György Szabo, Head of the OSCE Programme Office in Astana,  
Dear participants of the Conference,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honor and a pleasure to open our 20th Central Asia Media Conference today in Astana. I wish to thank the government of Kazakhstan for hosting this conference and for their cooperation, as well as the governments of Germany and Norway for providing the financial support for organizing this conference.

Astana is a very special place for the OSCE, as it is here, in 2010, that the last OSCE Summit took place. Under the Chairmanship of Kazakhstan, the OSCE Heads of States and Governments adopted an important declaration called '*Towards a Security Community.*'

In this text, which addressed major security and cooperation issues, the participating States clearly reaffirmed their support to the comprehensive approach to security of the OSCE, which includes fundamental freedoms and freedom of the media.

Let me quote this declaration:

*“Convinced that the inherent dignity of the individual is at the core of comprehensive security, we reiterate that human rights and fundamental freedoms are inalienable, and that their protection and promotion is our first responsibility.”*

The Heads of State also declared:

*“We value the important role played by civil society and free media in helping us to ensure full respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy, including free and fair elections, and the rule of law.”*

Today, eight years later, in Astana, we will look at the developments that have happened since then regarding media freedom in the region. I will look at it from my monitoring of the region, as the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, for over a year, and from what I have drawn from my visits and meetings with the authorities, civil society and the media community.

An overview of the main issues shows a very contrasted situation, with some progress, but also a lot of remaining problems.

As the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, I have the mandate from the 57 participating States to alert on breach in commitments and on restrictions to media freedom, but also to assist and support governments to improve policies and legislation. So, what do we see?

We see a lot of new media initiatives and of journalists who try to do their work and to contribute to the information of the public and to the development of their country.

But too often, in the region, journalists are working under pressure and fear; they lack access to information, especially public information which could be provided by the authorities. They are afraid to report on sensitive political issues, on corruption cases, or on dissenting views.

And when they do so, they face problems in front of tribunals. In different cases, we have seen charges brought against journalists for economic crimes, fraud or extortion. Unfortunately, there are still several bloggers imprisoned.

Other journalists have been prosecuted for exposing classified information or under criminal defamation laws that may lead to detention and high fines.

Many Central Asian journalists have to live in exile, as their media outlets give the floor to critical views on their government.

Too often, in my mandate, I have to intervene on overbroad and undue restrictive measures curtailing media freedom, such as closing down or blocking online media, blocking access to social networks, or throttling of the Internet speed.

I see individuals being brought in for questioning, or even facing administrative fines, for simply posting comments or even just liking social media posts.

Laws against disinformation are being misused to deter journalists from reporting about corruption, and to stifle media coverage of inconvenient topics and current debates in society.

A rising negative trend in the region is the growing use of laws countering extremism and hate speech against social media users and, by the same token, against journalists and their media outlets. These laws are pursuing legitimate objectives; we face the same problem everywhere in the OSCE region where hate speech and extremist content are dangerous. However, these laws are very often characterized by the use of too vague and broad definitions, creating uncertainty, leading to abuse and to self-censorship.

But there are also positive developments that I welcome, and I would like to see many more. A few examples: in some instances, exorbitant damages were abandoned in

defamation cases brought in by famous public figures, like in Kyrgyzstan. We also observe a very welcome increase in the cooperation between journalists' associations and law enforcement agencies in tackling illegal content, but also about reporting on terrorism and other sensitive issues in Tajikistan. It is also of great importance that the states in the region are paying increasing attention to the issue of media literacy, such as in Uzbekistan where several journalists have been released from detention last year—that was another very important development.

The journalists' community in the region has a strong voice, is ready to improve the quality of the media and, importantly, has demonstrated resilience and solidarity when standing up for their colleagues, and here, in Kazakhstan, in 2017, there was a wide consultation between the government and civil society on draft amendments to the media law; I wish it will be a fruitful consultation.

Today, it is time to not only reaffirm the commitments on media freedom. It is time to turn them into a living reality of a pluralistic and free media landscape. Freedom of the media is a commitment of all OSCE participating States and we need to work with the authorities, civil society and the media community to strengthen the environment for media freedom, and to improve the legislation which will allow for the development of the media.

We need laws that protect freedom of speech and not stifle it, laws that make it easy to establish new media outlets.

We need a political environment that is more tolerant of different views and of criticism; that is a part of modernisation and development of any country.

We need a plurality of voices and opinions in a plurality of languages.

At the age of fake news, disinformation and propaganda, we also need professional and ethical journalism, with a strong credibility, carefully maintained through self-regulation mechanisms.

We need support to the investigative reporting, and not criminal prosecution under spurious charges of a breach of privacy or as dissemination of false information.

We need a highly competent and independent linguistic expertise in defamation lawsuits, but also in investigations concerning extremism.

We also need a reasonable cap on the amount of damages awarded in civil defamation suits, which would not ruin media outlets.

A diverse and strong media landscape contributes to more democratic societies and more efficient governments in many ways. The quality of governance improves, when leaders are held to account. Public spending improves, when transparency will be asked

by the media. Transparency and media freedom contribute to the fight against corruption.

Media are the first to detect new and difficult issues in society, and they give the floor to individuals and groups with diverse interests and concerns.

Free media also offer the space to debate different possible solutions to issues faced by the society.

And in front of new risks like terrorism, there is no strong and resilient society without free and independent media.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In our sessions today and tomorrow, we will address all these issues and the very important topic of the future of journalism as well as the current developments regarding media freedom in the region. These sessions will greatly benefit from the vast expertise of media professionals from the region but also from outside, from government officials and experts gathered here.

The first session will address the need to safeguard quality information and will discuss the future of journalism in the digital age.

The second session will focus on fake news and on ways to counter disinformation. We'll hear about fact-checking initiatives, and the role of professional ethics.

After lunch, we'll have two side-events. And then, two parallel working groups will start. In the first working group, we'll discuss the balance between media regulators and self-regulation by the profession. The second working group will debate the issue of hate speech, and how to counter it.

Tomorrow, in the third session, we will discuss recent media freedom developments in the region since the Astana 2010 Summit with representatives of governments and civil society from most of the countries. This is a unique opportunity that this conference provides every year.

I thank all of you for being here, and am very much looking forward to a fruitful conference. I sincerely hope that together, we will contribute to a new impetus of media freedom in the region.

It is my belief that freedom of the media will be at the heart of the development of the region, that there can be no development without access to information, openness to different ideas and opinions, and freedom of expression.

In the words of the great Indian economist, Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen: “Development is the gradual enlargement of freedoms.” So, we will try to discuss how to enlarge freedom as a contribution to development.

I wish you a very inspiring conference.

Thank you very much.