



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe  
The Representative on Freedom of the Media  
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**Human Dimension Implementation Meeting  
Session on media freedom  
Warsaw, 22 September 2016**

Excellencies,  
Distinguished Representatives of Civil Society,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to once again open the session on media freedom and free expression in the OSCE, update you on the situation across the region and present to you the main priorities of my Office.

I would like to extend a special, warm welcome to all the journalists present here today, as well as to the members of the civil society, and thank you in advance for your contribution to today's discussion.

Let me also take this opportunity to thank the German OSCE Chairmanship, my colleague Director Link, and his dedicated staff in ODIHR, for organizing this important gathering.

I especially welcome the innovative format of the opening plenary, which I had the privilege to participate in.

Now let me turn to the topic of this morning, the state of media freedom and free expression in the OSCE region.

**SAFETY**

As in prior years, safety of journalists is the key issue to address today. In order to grasp the gravity of the situation that we are about to tackle in the next three hours, we just have to look at the numbers and the names of those harmed, in some cases even killed, for their journalistic work.

Just like in previous years, journalists continue to lose their lives for doing their job, informing the public on issues that affect us all. How many, you may ask? Does the number really matter? Even one case is one too many.

Perhaps it took the events of January 7 of last year in Paris, when eight journalists were killed over cartoons, to wake us up to the bigger picture; that there is a full-scale, all-out assault being waged against media and free expression.

We cannot look at the safety issue as a set of numbers of dead and injured.

Violence against journalists includes much more than that. It includes the use of anti-terrorism laws, criminal libel legislation and mass surveillance to silence critics of the powerful.

In the past years I have argued that this situation can only be reversed if the participating States demonstrate the political will to stop their countries from turning into battlegrounds where freedom of expression is attacked.

The sad reality is, however, that the genuine recognition in far too many OSCE participating States is missing; that there is a denial of problems and no will to remedy the situation.

While numbers are only part of the story when it comes to illustrating the scale of the ongoing assault on free media and free expression, they do tell a story.

Since I last spoke to you in September 2015, my Office has documented more than 50 physical attacks on media workers, including deaths of journalists.

Most of these attacks and murders go unpunished, attackers and masterminds remain free and I am constantly calling on the authorities to investigate and prosecute.

In 2 weeks we will mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the killing of Anna Politkovskaya. Her death is a gruesome reminder, not only in the Russian Federation, but in the entire OSCE region, that impunity for crimes committed against journalists must be eradicated.

We all remember the murders of Georgyi Gongadze, Hrant Dink, Slavko Ćurivija, Elmar Huseynov and Dusko Jovanović – in none of these killings has justice been fully served.

## **ONLINE SAFETY OF FEMALE JOURNALISTS**

Just as our human rights apply online as well as offline, the same is true when we speak about safety.

As you may recall from last year, I have been alarmed by the rapidly growing number of reports from across the OSCE region about how female journalists and bloggers are singled out and fiercely attacked in social media via tweets, Facebook posts and in comments to online articles and blogs.

The issue has become, and will definitely remain, in the focus of the work of my Office, as we urgently need to raise more awareness to the serious problems caused by online threats on female journalists, and their possible spread into the realm of physical violence. Furthermore, the phenomenon has a devastating and wide-ranging impact on freedom of the media at large, as more and more journalists and bloggers are likely to engage in self-censorship.

Threats and fear of being verbally or physically abused may have a significant impact on what and how news stories are reported. It is psychological violence that creeps in quietly and may result in trauma. As a result, journalists may choose to opt out or stop writing critically on issues of importance.

## **CVE**

This year, just like in previous years, we have also seen alternative methods to restrict and punish alternative voices and independent media.

To give you an example, I have repeatedly warned the OSCE participating States about the effect of laws countering extremism on free expression and free media.

I said that anti-extremism laws could be particularly dangerous for free media when they fail to clearly define the notion of extremism. And they are likewise problematic when they fail to properly define the criteria and safeguards which are necessary to guarantee their fair interpretation and enforcement.

The situation has not improved. Our very own security has become one of the biggest threats to freedom of expression.

## **INTERVENTIONS**

Although the aim of my remarks here today is not to get into too many country-specific concerns in the OSCE region, allow me to nonetheless make a few short remarks about several countries that need to be highlighted.

Following the recent coup attempt in **Turkey** and the series of terrorist attacks it is understandable that the authorities need revise and strengthen security arrangements. As I have remarked on many occasions and stated in my public statement the day after the coup attempt, I condemn in the strongest terms any attempt to change the democratic order of Turkey through the use of force.

Democratically elected governments must be safeguarded, but they in turn must protect media freedom and support the role journalists play in ensuring and strengthening democracies. What we have seen in the following weeks is pressure exercised by the authorities on critical journalists and media outlets in Turkey.

My Office currently estimates that there are currently 120 imprisoned journalists, about 100 media outlets closed and 140,000 websites blocked.

We should all worry about this greatly, because silencing critical voices does not only harm the journalists who lose their jobs for their critical views or whose freedom is taken away. It also fundamentally weakens the democratic foundations of the society, because it paralyzes pluralistic debates and the free exchange of ideas among people.

I call on Turkey once again to engage constructively, and implement, its OSCE commitments on media freedom and freedom.

Of course, Turkey is not the only country where OSCE commitments to free media and free expression are under severe strain.

Independent media remain continuously targeted in the **Russian Federation**, using different methods. Journalists' safety remains at an all-time low; as mentioned earlier, impunity for crimes against journalists prevails, and laws infringing free expression and free media have

been introduced and are enforced. More than 30 murders of journalists are still not fully or investigated at all.

Instead of ensuring protection and independence of members of the media, the authorities are effectively limiting the space for public debate and the citizens' right to freedom of information.

**Azerbaijan** – I welcome the release of Khadija Ismayilova; this was a very positive step, as was the Presidential pardon of a number of imprisoned journalists and freedom of expression advocates, including Rasul Jafarov. Unfortunately, Ismayilova's sentence has only been suspended, which means she is not able to travel and be here with us today. I call on the authorities to drop all charges against her and release the remaining imprisoned journalists.

As the crisis in and around **Ukraine** continues, there are a host of media freedom issues. Only two months ago, Pavel Sheremet, a journalist with Radio Vesti and the Ukrainskaya Pravda, was killed by a car bomb. That brings to 10 the number of journalists killed in Ukraine since the conflict began in early 2014. Additionally, impunity of violence against journalists remains highly problematic. This summer personal information of more than 4,000 representatives of various Ukrainian and international media outlets was published on a website, resulting in a number of them receiving death threats. I met two of the journalists yesterday at a side event.

In **Armenia**, journalists increasingly require protection while reporting on civil unrest. This summer, I sought reassurances from the authorities that journalists' rights and safety would be protected and urged that the government should implement practical steps to ensure restraint on the part of law enforcement toward members of the media.

My office has documented increasing number of threats and harassment of journalists in South East Europe. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia** journalists are intimidated, threatened and beaten with impunity. Murders from the past are yet to be resolved. Public broadcasting reform is stalled in all the countries of the region, keeping the media outlets under political control.

Let us not forget about media freedom concerns in **EU Member States**. The severe weakening of media pluralism in **Hungary** that started a few years ago; worrisome developments affecting the independence of public service media in our host country, **Poland**, and negative legislative trends in several **Western European** states that have adopted, or are in the process of adopting, security-driven legislation that can infringe on free expression all indicate that freedom of expression is challenged in this political block that has democracy and human rights as one of its founding values.

Only last week in the **United States** police issued an arrest warrant against a journalist who was reporting on issue of clear public interest.

The situation for free media continues to be challenging also in other parts of the OSCE region. In many of the participating States in **Central Asia**, there is hardly any or no progress for media freedom. The fact that there very few interventions from my Office is not a sign that things are getting better. Quite the contrary, in many countries there is stagnation and in others we are seeing a slow decline for free media.

## PROPAGANDA

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

One of our first commitments in our founding document, the Helsinki Final Act is that the countries should promote - let me quote: “a climate of confidence and respect among peoples consonant with their duty to refrain from propaganda for wars of aggression.”

Today counter-propaganda, information wars and hybrid wars are the terms that have become part of our daily discourse.

Stories of conspiracy theories, tortured children, mass graves, rapes and mail parcels with heads of insurgents fill television screens and social media feeds. Some of this material might be illegal under international and national laws; other might be unethical, disturbing, or simply unorthodox and dissenting.

While dealing with media content is not at the core of my Mandate, let me underline the reasons why this issue is of concern.

Propaganda destroys the core of the profession of journalism. Journalists are forced or bribed to be a mere conduit of the messages. It becomes an instrument to establish authoritarianism, thus distorting basic foundations of democracy. It affects public trust in the media.

The threat of propaganda becomes an excuse for governments to restrict or even ban all hostile messages, actual and potential, coming from abroad.

Propaganda for war and hatred strikes at the very foundation of the OSCE principle of comprehensive security. The use of propaganda in times of conflict has the effect of nothing less than throwing gasoline on an open flame. Propaganda fuels and contributes to the escalation of conflict. It prevents desired disarmament, security and co-operation.

Since the onset of the conflict in and around Ukraine in 2014 my Office has spent considerable time and resources on working with Russian and Ukrainian journalists in confidence-building measures. Senior representatives from Russian and Ukrainian journalists associations regularly come to Vienna to discuss ways to improve professional standards and the safety of journalists. These meetings have led to a degree of success.

## INSTITUTIONS

Finally, allow me to address some internal issues, most notably the importance of the work by the OSCE institutions. I use this opportunity, with such a distinguished audience, to repeat what I briefly mentioned on Monday. The defense and advancement of human rights in the OSCE participating States is strengthened by our Institutions. The OSCE is known *for* its institutions, *not* in spite of them. It is time for all of you to come to the defense of the institutions – for the sake of human rights.

I therefore call on all of you to protect and preserve the independence and the mandates of the institutions that you, in a highly commendable and self-critical move, established around two decades ago.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It has come to that time when I ask the question that I ask each year in this forum. Is media freedom stronger than a year ago? Are journalists working under safer conditions than before?

I am sure it comes as no surprise to any of you that after all the issues I just mentioned, the answer remains, as in previous years, a loud and clear no.

Now that you have heard my assessment, in the coming minutes we will get to hear what the authorities will say about the status of free media and free expression in their countries.

So before I close, I would like to ask the authorities sitting here at the table to use this opportunity and in the presence of so many outstanding and brave members of the civil society, take an honest look at their own record and stop denying that there are problems.

It is only through honest and direct discussions that we, together, can improve the essential right to free expression and free media.

Thank you.