



23rd OSCE Central Asia Media Conference

Promoting public value of the media in Central Asia

Opening remarks

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me wish you a good morning and warmly welcome you all to the 23rd Central Asia Media Conference, and the first one for myself since I started my mandate as OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media this year. I was of course hoping that this would also be an opportunity to meet with all of you in person. I know that many of you have been working closely with my predecessors and my Office. Let me assure that I want to continue and possibly even deepen this cooperation in the coming years.

Unfortunately, due to the on-going COVID-19-pandemic and the related restrictions, which keep challenging us all in our lives and planning, we were not yet able to return to a conference fully held in-person. It was nevertheless important to me to come as close to you as possible. Let me at this point express my warm thanks to the Uzbek authorities for welcoming and hosting us here in Tashkent. While I cannot meet those of you not present in Tashkent, I do hope that this will happen in the nearest future, either during an event or during my country visits.

For more than 20 years, the Central Asia Media conferences have been an important forum for an opinion exchange among journalists, media rights organizations and state institutions. This is the third time that the conference takes place in Tashkent, in the year when Uzbekistan celebrates the thirtieth anniversary of its independence, alongside Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. My warmest congratulations on the occasion. Let me assure

you that Central Asia and Mongolia are among my top priorities and I hope to visit all capitals in the nearest future.

For this year's edition of the Central Asia Media Conference, after close consultation with various stakeholders, I have proposed the topic of public service broadcasting and public value of the media.

In countries across the OSCE region we witness, an increasing split of the public sphere, triggered by a polarization of society, which is further amplified by social media. Against this background, public service is increasingly critical to restore the common *agora* where citizens convene for the debate that should be at the core of our democracies. A debate based on information that is guided by high professional standards and therefore better prepared to address some of the threats stemming from the circulation of lies, conspiracy theories or disinformation.

Public service plays an indispensable role in providing public interest programming and enhancing professionalism of media, thereby contributing to diversity, and pluralism. By virtue of its mandate, it is designed to provide citizens with an access to timely and high-quality information on matters of public interest. This particular aspect comes increasingly to the fore in the second year of the global pandemic, in a year which has unfortunately also seen rising tensions within our societies, natural disasters, and multiple regional conflicts. Finally, public service increases government transparency and improves participatory democracy, thus fostering the well-being and development of our societies.

I am pleased that we have managed to engage excellent experts from across the OSCE area as speakers, who have accepted to share their insight with us, and I am pleased to welcome distinguished high-level guests at the conference. And I am especially pleased that representatives of legislative chambers and executive structures have taken the time to attend the conference, as the rationale behind this event continues to be: to give journalists and human rights advocates the platform where they can discuss matters of national importance with the authorities.

Let me start with a question: what is the public value of the media in the digital environment and how can it render a service to a society? All public service broadcasters in the OSCE area have mission statements and they all contain similar elements, namely:

- To provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them.
- To act with high standards of integrity and professionalism and quality
- To support learning for people of all ages.
- To reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities, while promoting inclusion and social cohesion
- To sustain and defend national culture and cultural diversity.

I am fully aware that broadcasting systems across the OSCE region vary significantly, and so do the habits and interests of their audiences. Therefore, I have asked our experts from the region and outside to deliberate on the lessons learnt in their own country as well as on the perception of public service media in Central Asia.

Any discussion of any model of public service media precipitates a reel of questions: who controls a public service broadcaster, who decides and how are appointments of senior executives made, how will it be financed and how do we gauge the use of its service to the public If we decide to move towards this model, how do we proceed with the transformation of existing national broadcasters? And, of course, how can public service media be accountable without losing the independence, which would make them unable to play their central role in our democratic societies.

When a society embarks on a process of reforms, there is invariably one result among many others: a desire to build some legal and institutional structure typically associated with democratic societies. One important element of such a structure is a free and diverse media system with a public service media sector.

Coming back to the issue of control and self-regulation, a public broadcaster will typically be required by its statute to meet certain standards. Those standards will include among others accuracy, impartiality, independence,

accountability and integrity. And here I would like to share with you some principles that I came across and find very fitting in this context:

Set standards succinctly – while being careful to separate aspirations and principles from enforceable rules

Test those standards fairly – either in response to others (by handling complaints) or by developing your own tests (for example through quality assurance processes)

Provide just remedies – that recognise the benefits of swift correction and clarification, especially in a digital age of big, widely cast and enduring data

Encourage reflection, discussion, and training – so that experience among colleagues is shared among colleagues.

Collect good data and circulate it – close the feedback loops after opening them.

Review and disclose; disclose and review.

Tomorrow, the second day of our conference, will start with an online side event, at 9:15 presenting a Russian language version of the Safety of Female Journalists Online - short “#SOFJO” Resource Guide. The #SOFJO Resource Guide provides a series of proposed actions for ten key stakeholder groups to address gender-based online abuse of female journalists. The presentation will open a new and exciting stage of my Office’s project on safety of female journalists online, which will bring action closer to the involved stakeholders, and I hope that we shall have many more events on the topic in Central Asia.

The side event will be followed by the second session starting at 10:15, which is dedicated to the snapshot of the current media situation in all the six participating States – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Mongolia, where members of the civil society and representatives of state bodies and agencies will share their view on the matter, with a particular focus on safety of journalists. I am very much looking forward to this exchange, which will provide us all with an opportunity to take stock of ongoing reforms, persisting or evolving challenges and possible solutions to them. It is discussions like these that enable myself and my Office

to offer assistance and support in order to strengthen media freedom in line with the commitments the participating States of our organization, the OSCE, have agreed and adopted over time. And I see these discussions not as a one-off event, but as part of an ongoing dialogue with both authorities and the media and civil society in this region, to which I am wholeheartedly committed.

With this, I wish all of us two days of lively and substantive discussions, which I am already looking forward to.