



## EUROPEAN UNION

### OSCE Permanent Council No. 1312 Vienna, 6 May 2021

#### EU Statement on World Press Freedom Day

Monday, 3 May marked World Press Freedom Day, a day when we recall that the protection and promotion of a free, diverse and independent media, both online and offline, is indispensable to the functioning of inclusive, peaceful and democratic societies. By contributing to good governance, transparency, and accountability, press freedom is all the more important during a public health crisis such as the one we currently face. We welcome this year's global theme "*Information as a Public Good*", a reminder to fully implement our OSCE commitments, ensuring that critical voices are heard and that journalists and media actors can perform their work safely, independently and without undue interference or influence. Because press freedom and access to information are as essential online as they are offline, the EU is determined to continue addressing misinformation and manipulations of information online, by holding the major platforms accountable to make their systems fairer, safer and more transparent. We also seek with all partners effective means to support sustainable business models for independent media.

As stated by the High Representative Josep Borrell on behalf of the EU on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day "*At a time when independent and free media reporting is more essential than ever, press freedom continues to be under threat.*" The EU is worried about the deteriorating situation of freedom of the media and the increasingly difficult working environment for journalists and media actors throughout the OSCE area.

During the past year, we have observed a significant surge in serious threats to journalists and media actors, including smear campaigns, physical attacks, arbitrary detention and imprisonment, harassment and intimidation, death threats and even murder. Moreover, attacks on female journalists, both online and offline, continue to

be on the rise. Regrettably, the health crisis has only exacerbated restrictions on media freedom and increased the difficulties faced by journalists and the media. The COVID-19 pandemic must not be used to restrict media freedom or to silence journalists but, on the contrary, it should be the occasion to encourage free, independent and diverse media, as an important tool to address the crisis.

The EU commends the courageous work of journalists and media actors who, in often highly challenging conditions, continue to provide independent information. We regret that many participating States, particularly in conflict-affected areas and in their neighbourhood, fall short in meeting their international obligations and OSCE commitments to ensure the safety of journalists and to promote and protect freedom of expression and media freedom. We strongly encourage all participating States, and in light of recent human rights and media freedom indexes, in particular Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, to take decisive steps to fully respect their commitments.

The EU shares the concerns expressed by the RFoM regarding the negative implications of the political developments in Belarus on the work of media outlets, and the continued persecutions and harassment of journalists and media actors. We urge the Belarusian authorities to end the ongoing crackdown on independent media, and reiterate our urgent call to immediately release and rehabilitate all 12 currently arbitrarily detained journalists and media actors, including Katerina Borisevich, Katerina Andreyeva, and Darya Chultsova.

It is also concerning that the Russian authorities continue to restrict the work of independent media platforms, as well as individual journalists and other media actors. The EU reiterates its longstanding position that the so-called “foreign agent” law contributes to a systematic infringement of basic freedoms, and restricts civil society, independent media, and the rights of political opposition in Russia. We reject the recent decision to include independent media outlet Meduza on the list of “foreign agents”.

The EU will continue following these, and other, worrying cases closely. We must make sure that those responsible for attacks against journalists and media actors do not enjoy impunity.

In these unprecedented times, all participating States should scrutinize the implementation of their commitments and obligations related to freedom of expression

and the media. We are aware that the EU and its Member States are not immune to shortcomings in this field, including with respect to the safety of journalists. To that end, Member States seek to engage with the RFoM and deeply appreciate these exchanges.

The RFoM is a unique and valuable resource for participating States, and the EU stands firmly by the institution and its mandate. We call on all participating States to engage constructively with the RFoM, to heed the concerns raised, and to draw on the expertise of the Office to remedy shortcomings.

The Candidate Countries REPUBLIC of NORTH MACEDONIA\*, MONTENEGRO\* and ALBANIA\*, as well as UKRAINE align themselves with this statement.

\* Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.