



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
Harlem Désir

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Closing remarks

- Check against delivery -

Excellency, dear Damjan Mancevski,
Dear participants,

Thank you Minister Mancevski for joining us and presenting the important reforms in media laws that your government is currently discussing with the Parliament.

It has been my pleasure to be here for the last two days in Struga for this South East Europe Media Conference.

I would like to first of all thank all of you for joining us, for participating in very vibrant and dynamic discussions on a range of issues that affect media freedom in the region.

Each of the panellists gave us important insight into their area of expertise. There were as many questions raised as answers given which shows us that there is still much to be discussed in the coming months.

I would like to use this opportunity to highlight some of the important issues raised and the main recommendations.

These recommendations, resulting from the panel presentations and rich discussions that followed, will provide concrete steps towards progress on strengthening media freedom in the region.

Of course the issue which dominated our discussion is clearly safety of journalists. The shooting of Olivera Lakić was the latest horrifying reminder of the threats and violence that many journalists face on a regular basis.

Yesterday's joint declaration sent a strong message of support to, and solidarity with, Olivera and her colleagues at Vijesti and call on the authorities to do more to protect all journalists.

The first session of our conference highlighted many examples of the constant threat of violence faced, especially by investigative journalists, throughout the OSCE region. It is no coincidence that the last 3 journalists killed, Daphne Caruna Galizia, Jan Kuciak and Maxim Borodin were all working on investigative stories. Their work is the bedrock of democracy and is crucial for holding those in power to account.

Every obstacle to press freedom is an obstacle to democracy. They are an obstruction of, not only the work of journalists, but also an obstruction of people's right to access information. Crimes against journalists are crimes against democracy.

Both Daphne Caruana Galizia and Jan Kuciak had links to my Office. Daphne after she was charged for defamation and Jan, who many of you have met, as a participant at a number of our regional conferences, in Belgrade, Vienna and Budapest, and as a member of our informal New Media Net network.

Any attacks or threats against investigative journalism should sound an alarm to the authorities who must ensure that journalists work in a safe and secure environment.

To emphasize this point, our recommendations on this issue are also firm demands:

- 1) Politicians and public officials must not create a hostile environment for the media through their statements and actions;
- 2) Any threat to media or journalists must be taken seriously and investigated;
- 3) Impunity is not an option for democracies. Perpetrators and masterminds of crimes against the media must be brought to justice;
- 4) It was clearly said that governments need to allocate adequate human and financial resources to investigations. Law enforcement, prosecutors and judges must be made aware of the necessity to treat attacks against journalists as a high priority and work with journalists' organisations; and
- 5) Special attention must be paid to the issue of safety of female journalists. As we have repeatedly heard female journalists face additional threats including online. In response, the authorities and media outlets must develop gender mainstreamed strategies to better ensure their safety so that we do not lose these essential voices in our societies.

The second issue that we raised in the conference was the working conditions of journalists. Journalists in the region face very grave problems when it comes to safeguarding their employment and social rights. It is obvious that journalists who are not secure when it comes to their employment, lack independence.

We heard about the need to strengthen the role of the journalists unions in ensuring collective rights. Better working conditions reduce potential exposure to political and other forms of pressure.

In many cases media outlets themselves are under economic pressure and pass on this pressure to their employees. They face unfair markets, politically controlled advertising, financial and tax inspections.

There is a need for more transparency when it comes to media funding, especially when funding comes from public bodies. It is important that the authorities do not try to influence the media market through hidden subsidies.

We will provide a set of recommendations on public press subsidies based on good practices from other European participating States in the coming months.

Our third session, on public service media, emphasized the important role they play in educating and informing our societies. There is a need for restructuring of all public media in the region to ensure their political independence and financial sustainability. The governing bodies and staff must be selected on the basis of their professional qualities and not party loyalty. Public service media must also be at the forefront of fostering investigative journalism. They should support innovative ways to engage their audience. Financing, modernisation through investment and training of personnel and clear provisions in law to ensure independence, are key for the future of Public Service Broadcasters.

The regulatory agencies must have the ability to exercise their role to protect Public Service from political interference and guarantee fair conditions for the development of other media actors.

In the fourth panel on self-regulation we heard about the challenges of transforming the current self-regulatory models for use in the online environment.

Self-regulation can be an important tool to raise professional and ethical standards.

Digital literacy strategies are important to ensure that journalists and media actors as well as the public are able to effectively engage in media self-regulation.

Journalists' Codes of Ethics should reflect the changing media landscape, and every effort should be made to ensure their consistent implementation.

The sustainability of Press Councils should be a priority for the media community given their essential role in facilitating media self-regulation.

The panel on digitalisation highlighted that basic human rights and rights related to freedom of expression and access to information need to be safeguarded online,

just as they are offline.

Technological advances can foster the democratization of the media, expanding the possibilities for self-expression and delivering news faster to broader audiences. However, media should continue focusing on quality rather than fast delivery.

Credible research and facts should be the basis of all journalism and media should continue to strengthen their credibility through fact-checking, particularly online.

No single model for expanding the revenue base in the digital age has proven sustainable or effective. Media should therefore explore and experiment with different financing models in the digital age.

The last panel of the day was on so-called “fake news”. During this panel it was determined that States should not adopt legal bans on “fake news” that are counterproductive and prone to abuse.

Existing laws, including on civil defamation laws, provide adequate legal remedies for the dissemination of false information which harm reputation.

The best way to counter disinformation is by creating a free, independent and diverse communication environment and a media literate society.

Internet intermediaries must have clear policies for restricting or deleting content which meet, as a minimum, due process guarantees and international standards on freedom of expression.

These are just some of the issues that I have noted from our discussions.

These conclusions and recommendations reflect what many of us have already stated many times in different fora. What is important is that they are followed-up and implemented. These recommendations will also help me in my discussions with the governments in the region.

Over the next few weeks we will work on a more detailed set of conclusions as an outcome of this conference. We will, of course, also share these recommendations with all of you. In addition, we will publish a parallel set of recommendations specifically on internet regulation in the region.

These conclusions and recommendations will support the important work the OSCE Missions are already carrying out on the ground.

All of the Missions also have safety of journalists as their first priority and are engaged with the authorities and the media community to help improve the situation. This is an area where we work together very closely.

We will also work with the OSCE Missions on a variety of concrete priorities:

The **OSCE Mission to Skopje** is also working on media and digital literacy and support to the public service media in their programming for small and non-majority media communities.

The **OSCE Presence in Albania** is supporting the restructuring of the public broadcaster and strengthening of economic and social rights of journalists.

The **Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina** will also focus on safety of female journalists and on improving links between the media and law enforcement agencies, support to the public broadcasting system and media literacy for students and youth.

The **Mission in Kosovo** is assisting in the establishment of a commission that will support investigations into the killings of journalists between 1998- 2005, following similar models in Serbia and Montenegro. It is also focusing on Support to Media with an Emphasis on Non-Majority Media and Female Journalists, Support to Media Supervisory Bodies and Public Service Media, Media literacy and Expanding the Media and Public Relations Capacities of Public Institutions.

The **Mission to Montenegro** also supports public service media, media self-regulation and media literacy.

The **Mission to Serbia** is supporting the development of a new media strategy and focusing on a broad range of actions to bolster media literacy.

From this extensive list, it is clear that our Missions are there to support you and the authorities in strengthening media freedom.

I would like to thank the authorities of all the States of the region for supporting this conference as well as the OSCE participating States that provided financial support for the organisation of this event - the Netherlands and Austria.

I also want to convey my special thanks the OSCE Mission to Skopje which helped in every way possible: the Acting Head of Mission Jeffery Goldstein as well as his excellent team, Ioanna, Mihajlo and Stephan and all the drivers.

I want to thank all the OSCE Missions that organised each of the sessions and ensured that we benefit from expert knowledge from throughout the region.

Thank you also to the technical staff, interpreters and hotel staff who ensured our comfort and a high quality experience during the event.

And, of course, thanks to my team who pulled all of this together, and here I want to specially thank Adis, Jennifer, Sejal, Deniz, and Frane.

Lastly, I want to thank all of you who contributed as speakers, moderators and participants, sharing your knowledge and experience.

Thank you for being leaders in the democratic transformation of the region.

I very much look forward to continuing these discussions at another time in another place.

Thank you.