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EUROPEAN UNION

**OSCE Permanent Council No. 1226
Vienna, 2 May 2019**

EU Statement on occasion of World Press Freedom Day

Tomorrow marks the World Press Freedom Day. This is an occasion to reflect on the indispensable role that free, diverse and independent media plays in any democratic society. Without freedom of expression and free media, an informed, active and engaged citizenry is impossible. A Declaration to this effect by the High Representative Federica Mogherini on behalf of the EU will be distributed tomorrow. In the OSCE specifically, World Press Freedom Day further serves as a reminder that freedom of expression lies at the core of the comprehensive concept of security. There is a clear link between democratic, peaceful and prosperous societies that contribute to our joint security, and free expression and independent media. In this vein, we welcome this year's global theme Media for Democracy: Journalism and Elections in Times of Disinformation. The EU remains concerned by state-driven disinformation campaigns aiming to distort and pollute open debate in the society, online and offline, causing public harm, with impact also on our security. We will continue to challenge such attempts by building EU resilience, standing up for freedom of expression, and by encouraging media literacy and critical thinking as the antidote.

In many parts of the OSCE area, the situation for freedom of expression and media freedom is deteriorating. The EU deplores the increasing level of intimidation, pressure, violence and undue restrictions that target journalists, human rights defenders and other media actors. It is unacceptable that women journalists are often particularly subjected to threats and harassment simply because they are women.

We reiterate the need to fight impunity for all crimes against media actors, also because of the detrimental chilling effect it creates.

Following the successful adoption in Milan 2018 of the Decision on Safety of Journalists, it is now of paramount importance to focus on implementation and make full use of the expertise and advice of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. We note in this regard that according to the Reporters without Borders World Press Freedom Index for 2019, some OSCE participating States, including Russia, Belarus, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan have maintained their worryingly low positions towards the bottom of the index. During the last months, the EU has shared concerns expressed by the RFoM about legislative initiatives further damaging free speech in Russia, such as the so-called sovereign internet law. We regret that it was approved by the Federation Council on 22 April and signed into law on 1 May. We also echo the RFoM's condemnation of the continued deterioration of freedom of expression and safety of journalists in illegally annexed Crimea, including the arrest of citizen journalists on 28 March. In Turkey, the EU continues to follow with great concern the vast number of ongoing judicial processes against media actors, including Erol Önderoğlu and his colleagues where a verdict is likely to be announced on 17 July. Joining the RFoM, we express concern that on 25 April six previous journalists and staff of newspaper Cumhuriyet had to return to prison, following a court decision. All journalists who are behind bars for their work must be released. Many other recent examples in the OSCE region could be brought up in this context. While we echo the RFoM's relief that the travel ban imposed on Azeri blogger Mehman Huseynov was lifted, we likewise share his concerns about the situation for freedom of expression in the country and most recently the 18 March conviction of editor Anar Mammadov. Following a search in Belarus of TV channel Belsat's editorial office on 9 April, we reiterate the RFoM's call for respect for confidentiality of journalists' sources. We are concerned with the absence of freedom of speech in Turkmenistan, which is rated 180th out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index 2019, and call upon the Turkmen authorities to engage in a constructive dialogue on this issue. We welcome ongoing reforms in Uzbekistan and the stated readiness to engage in a dialogue with the RFoM following his April 17 intervention on the matter. We urge Uzbekistan to restore access to blocked online news media, including Ferghana Agency and

others. We also call on Tajikistan to take measures in favor of freedom of speech by lifting inter-alia censorship on independent media such as Asia+, Ferghana Agency and others. In Kazakhstan we remain concerned about the excessive restrictions on the freedom of expression, including in conjunction with a demonstration in the margins of the Almaty city marathon of 22 April as raised by the RFoM.

The EU and its Member States are also not immune to problems and shortcomings in these fields. In advancing the situation for media freedom within the EU, Member States seek to engage fully with the Office of the RFoM and deeply appreciate these exchanges. We also look forward to further dialogue with civil society as well as other participating States on the full implementation of all OSCE commitments and international obligations relating to freedom of expression and media freedom.

The RFoM is a unique resource of utmost value to participating States. The EU stands firmly by the institution, including the mandate of the Representative and the provision of adequate funds to the Office. We encourage all participating States to engage constructively and in good faith with the Representative, to heed the concerns he raises and to draw on the expertise of the Office.

The Candidate Countries NORTH MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO* and ALBANIA*, the Country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and Potential Candidate BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA, the EFTA country ICELAND, and CANADA align themselves with this statement.

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