

Opening remarks for Annual Police Experts Meeting APEM

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Distinguished Guests,
Excellencies,
Dear Colleagues,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to the 2020 OSCE Annual Police Experts Meeting. Today's conference is dedicated to recent developments, opportunities and challenges for the police in working with the media and journalists. A topic that is of great interest to our Office.

Oftentimes law enforcement officials are first in line when it comes to the protection of journalists. Together with the judiciary, they play a crucial role in protecting journalists and safeguarding a conducive media environment, both online and offline, and in combating impunity for crimes against media workers. In their interventions, the Representatives of this Office have repeatedly praised law enforcement agencies for their swift and thorough investigations into crimes committed against journalists.

Unfortunately, law enforcement agencies, being the most visible manifestation of government power, are also often first in line when it comes to clashes between state authorities and the media. In the seven months leading up to July this year, law enforcement officials have hindered, threatened, or physically abused at least 45 journalists during their work, or have pushed them to reveal their sources, blocked access to their websites, or illegally seized their material. Many more interventions during this period concerned the detention of journalists for doing their work. Even though other state authorities probably ordered a number of these arrests, all too often journalists were arrested by law enforcement officials acting on their own authority.

In this light, I would like to remind you that all OSCE participating States have recognized that human rights are fundamental for ensuring lasting peace, security, justice and co-operation, and acknowledged the essential role of free media in advancing these goals. As part of this effort, the OSCE Ministerial Council, in December 2018, explicitly mentioned that authorities should encourage law enforcement agencies to engage in awareness-raising and training activities to ensure the safety of journalists, and to promote the involvement of civil society in such activities, where appropriate.

This brings me to today's conference, which brings together law enforcement officials and other criminal justice practitioners with journalists and other representatives of the media, as well as OSCE delegations, representatives of regional and international organizations, academic researchers and civil society organizations. Mutual respect and better co-operation always start with better understanding and recognition of each other's roles, responsibilities and way of working. Meetings like these provide an excellent opportunity to learn from one another and to find common ground. This seems all the more pressing given the current global health crisis we are facing, which has had a severe impact on human rights, and the freedom of expression in particular. Today, we will be addressing in more detail two of these issues.

One of the increasingly pressing issues, in recent times, has been the use of social media and the ever-larger spread of disinformation. It is an issue with which journalists and law enforcement agencies are struggling with, albeit in different ways. All kinds of new technologies have contributed to enhancing freedom of expression in our societies, but they have also posed new challenges. For instance, how to make good use of these new technologies and how to counter the harm that they might cause to public order and to the democratic values we hold dear? Both law enforcement and journalists have suffered greatly from feelings of anxiety and even distrust among the public that arise from the spread of disinformation through various channels. On the other hand, as a means of counteracting false and misleading messages, both can benefit a lot from providing better and more transparent information to the public, an issue to which both professions can make their own distinguished contribution.

How to stay safe, even in times of heavy turmoil, is another field where there is a lot of room for exchange of experiences and perspectives between the two vocations. Attacks against the media during public protests and demonstrations are on the rise. In the last two reporting periods of the Representative on Freedom of the Media, covering the period from July 2019 to July 2020, at least 140 journalists were targeted while covering demonstrations in the OSCE region. Around two-thirds of these incidents came at the hands of law enforcement officials, ranging from impeding journalists' work and damaging their property, to physically assaulting and detaining them.

There is certainly room for improvement when looking at these numbers. The media should be able to trust law enforcement officials to protect them, not to have to worry about falling victim to their attacks.

This is all the more important when considering that, when it comes to demonstrations, the internationally recognized rights of the public are twofold. First, all members of the public should be able to freely and fully exercise their right to peaceful assembly, to associate, and to express themselves during public protests. The public also has the right to be informed about all demonstrations that are being held in their societies, including violent and unlawful ones, and about the reaction of the authorities thereto. Since journalists play a crucial role in providing information to the public, it is paramount that the media should be able to cover demonstrations and public protests safely and without interference.

We therefore have enough material for discussion and plenty of food for thought.

I want to conclude this introduction by saying that I am very much looking forward to a fruitful meeting. I would like to thank all of you for joining us today, and I want to express

particular thanks to our panellists and moderators for their readiness to share their expertise and steer the discussions.