



OPENING REMARKS

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**Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting
on the Functioning of Democratic Institutions in Times of Crisis**

Vienna, 16-17 May 2022

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Colleagues,

It is an honor to address you at the opening of the second Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting dedicated to the timely issue of the functioning of democratic institutions in times of crisis.

Timely, as we are facing an immense crisis in our region today.

A security crisis that is affecting our democracies, our values and the rules-based order that we have carefully built, over the past decades – not the least in this very organization.

Right now, the core principles of our organization are being grossly violated. The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation goes against everything that the OSCE stands for.

It has far reaching consequences for all of us, for our common security, for our democracies and of course, for media freedom.

When creating the mandate of the Representative on Freedom of the Media 25 years ago, all OSCE participating States agreed that media freedom is an indispensable part of democracy and comprehensive security. We know, as they did, that there is clear link between peace and democracy. Quality democracies are much less likely to engage in wars than autocracies. And freedom of the media, freedom of expression are key pillars of democracy.

There is no security without media freedom. This is the slogan marking our 25th anniversary. The tragic events unfolding before our eyes are a sad proof of this reality. As a consequence, we are witnessing the most significant deterioration of media freedom and the safety of journalists in our region since the RFOM institution was established.

We have agreed on many occasions, that independent, free and pluralistic media are an indispensable part of democratic societies. Indispensable because they provide us with information that shapes our thinking, our opinions and our decision-making. They also hold those in power to account, ask critical questions and detect wrongful actions. And free

media are of particular importance in safeguarding human rights and fundamental freedoms. Media have always been regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy, in a way making it a democratic institution in itself.

Access to reliable information and quality media is important at all times. However, it becomes vital **in times of crisis**.

The global health crisis linked to the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated this very clearly. It became ever more apparent how dependent we are on reliable, independent, quality information about our health and the measures taken to protect it.

The **information disorder** in our region is reaching new heights. This is fuelled by rising levels of distrust vis-à-vis the media, by increasing state control over information, by creeping media capture and by an unprecedented level of misinformation, disinformation and propaganda for war, both online and offline.

The war in Ukraine – like any other war – is also a war on media freedom. And this war is not only ongoing in Ukraine, but also in the Russian Federation and even in the rest of the OSCE region.

I want to pay tribute to all journalists working in Ukraine: those who have lost their lives, as well as those who continue to work under extremely difficult and dangerous circumstances. Their safety raises grave concerns, as the death toll, injuries, harassment, and abductions of media workers continue to grow.

I have said this many times before and I want to reiterate it once more: media professionals must be considered and protected as civilians; they must never be targets.

Let me also point to another issue that is very dear to me and which I raised in a Press Release on this year's International Women's Day. During war and conflict, patriarchal structures are often reinforced, which also affects journalists working in conflict areas and reporting from war.

Female journalists are more exposed to safety threats, often excluded from their own security assessment and experience limited access to conflict zones. In any crises and conflict situation, marginalized voices are at greater risk.

We need to ensure unhindered access for women journalists to report from conflict zones, as well as the need to address gender discrimination, hate speech and digital violence against journalists. Physical violence, online attacks, discrimination and hatred often accelerate during conflict situations and disproportionately affect women journalists and journalists with intersecting identities, resulting in the silencing of their voices, their reporting, and their perspectives.

We will hear in the 3rd working session of this Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting a testimony from Nataliya Gumenyuk, a Ukrainian journalist, who will provide us with a first-

hand account of the risks and challenges faced by media workers and reporters working from the war zones in Ukraine.

I also want to pay tribute to all the journalists that had to leave the Russian Federation and are working now in exile to continue to provide fact-based reporting on the developments in Ukraine. They too, work under extremely difficult circumstances. We will hear more about it from Nadezhda Prusenkovia, deputy editor at Novaya Gazeta, during the 3rd working session.

Looking ahead, we need to find **comprehensive solutions** to the manifold challenges that our democracies and media freedom face.

Let me emphasize that the **primary responsibility lies with the states**. They are obliged to protect and promote our human rights and fundamental freedoms. This includes the right to express yourself freely; free from harm, harassment, and any form of intimidation. States have also a positive obligation to protect the right of media workers to do their important mission in safety.

All of society has a role to play to further free, independent and pluralistic media, and to protect our democracies. We need to **re-establish public trust** in the media and value their contribution to vibrant democracies.

In this regard, the media themselves can play an important role, first and foremost by upholding a set of **professional standards** and through **self-regulation**. Self-regulation allows the media to maintain a dialogue with the public and at the same time, protects the **independence of journalists**. This is crucial for democracy.

At the same time, we need to equip our societies with the appropriate tools, resources and knowledge to navigate through a diverse media and information landscape. We need to invest more in **media education** and **media and information literacy**, across all generations. Media and information literacy may well be resource-intensive, but in the long will be an effective way of building resilient societies.

As the last speaker of the 3rd working session, the internationally recognized media ethicist Stephen J.A. Ward will guide us through the varied ethical assertions of journalists, focusing on the changing relationship between journalist and audience, and the ways in which the public can be educated to better access and value media.

I look forward to the discussions over the next two and a half days and thank you for your attention.