

**Remarks of Head of OSCE Presence in Albania,
Ambassador Bernd Borchardt,**

**At Media Development Forum 2017
Tirana, on 12 December 2017**

Your excellence Madam Vlahutin,
Chair of the Parliamentary Committee for Media, Ms Albana Vokshi,
Honorable members of the Parliament,
Ladies and Gentlemen from the press, media activists and developers,

I am honoured to address you today at the Media Development Forum. We are looking forward discussing with you today the public broadcaster's reform, challenges to freedom of the media, and prospects for developing a journalists' self-regulation in Albania. Strong and independent press is a basic pillar of democratic societies. We would like to see that this forum will contribute to strengthening media freedom and establishing a solid media sector - able to cope with the challenges ahead. This is the third year that we are having this roundtable event, and I am happy to see that this social interaction platform is slowly becoming a tradition.

Freedom of media is an indicator of a well-established democracy. But rights, though, come with responsibilities. Media is responsible for respecting standards and for the objectivity and quality of its reporting. Fake news is the newest challenge to media freedom. It undermines the credibility of media and creates different scrutiny layers. This poses an additional pressure on journalists' work. The only possible answer to it - is fact-based reporting, verification and clear distinction between reports, opinions and comments. If this distinction is lost, trust in media decreases - you lose your public credibility. Journalists can only redouble their efforts in checking and contrasting facts to achieve high-quality reporting.

Critical reporting is crucial for any democracy, but it has to be done with well-researched arguments and avoiding personal attacks. Criticize those who are powerful - that's your job - but with well-researched stories. I know that many in this room have been target of less well-researched stories, wrong allegations and unjustified attacks. That includes myself. Often it is so easy to find out whether a story is true and makes sense. It costs a phone call or a quick internet research. I have observed here and in other countries that some journalists just do not do that when they feel they have a juicy story.

Badly researched stories can even end up with defamation cases. We should all be aware that court cases can set precedents that can negatively affect the state of freedom of media, leading to self-censorship and hampering journalists' right or ability and willingness to write critically. I hope that judges dealing with such cases have the sensitive balance between the protection of the individual and the absolutely necessary freedom of the media in mind when they decide this kind of cases. Always bear in mind, please, that it is easier to defend a journalist when he or she is complying with professional standards. We are looking forward discussing ways of promoting quality journalism with you today.

Having effective and credible self-regulation mechanisms is the best barrier against interventions from authorities. Journalists should reflect and bring to the table their solutions to the linked issues, the ethical issues. Is it realistic that a single omnipotent media association or NGO can take the entire burden on its back? We don't think so. Instead, we advocate for a polycentric approach where media organizations will create a well-coordinated journalists' self-regulatory framework.

As for the demanding and long-term process of transformation of RTSH into an independent, accountable and sustainable public broadcaster, I feel encouraged by the latest developments. I would like to praise RTSH's top management for their commitment to pursue reforms in responding to digital age challenges, for their new Statute and Editorial principles, as well as news coverage improvements as we have seen from surveys. These reforms had been pointed out both by the EU and OSCE, and I am glad to note that they were successfully adopted. The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission's Final Report recognized RTSH's role in June 2017 parliamentary elections, and praised its decision not to accept any party-produced footage.

RTSH's key challenge remains program content improvement and regaining full trust of its audience. That's a long way to go to achieve it. The OSCE will continue assisting in close partnership with EU and European Broadcasting Union.

Professional dialogue is indispensable in finding solutions to new media realities and challenges. The OSCE is on your side, we want to support your efforts in improving the role of media and asserting its position in Albania's democracy.

Thank you for your attention! I hope you will enjoy this year's forum! Thank you!