



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

5th Annual South East Europe Media Conference
10-11 May 2018
Opening remarks

- Check against delivery -

Mr. Minister, dear Robert Popovski,

Ms. Deputy Minister, dear Artemis Malo,

Your Excellency,

Dear Participants,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you at the opening of the 5th South East Europe media conference, here in Struga, at a time of very important change and reform in the country.

I am especially glad to see that the event has attracted plenty of attention in the region, proving the importance of addressing media freedom in this part of the world.

This event, organized by my Office this year, is one of the largest fora in the region on freedom of the media. I extend my gratitude to everyone here with us today and I want to underline the fact that, for the first time, this conference has been organised together

with all the OSCE field operations in the region. Having all of them on board this year has brought our co-operation to a higher level, for which I am very grateful.

Since my appointment in July 2017, I have had the opportunity to visit almost all countries in the region, meeting with high-level authorities, members of the media community, civil society organizations and academics. These visits have provided me a first-hand picture of the media freedom situation, and hear as many local perspectives as possible.

During my tour of the region I heard time and again that the laws and regulations pertaining to the media in South East Europe are fair. However, the implementation of these laws is far from perfect and freedom of the media in South East Europe has been fragile for many years now.

The environment is also still marked with major threats to the press. Journalists are still harassed and threatened for reporting unfavourable news. Safety of journalists remains a high priority, and crimes against journalists go largely unpunished, which is unacceptable.

As we now meet, a journalist from Montenegro, Olivera Lakić, is in hospital after being shot in front of her home two days ago. Yesterday I went to Podgorica to visit her. She is a very courageous journalist and I was impressed by her determination. I wanted to praise her courage and to express solidarity. I also wanted to say in Podgorica that this attack and the many others against her Vijesti colleagues are unacceptable. I met with the authorities of Montenegro to convey this message and demand that all necessary

means are dedicated to the investigation into this horrendous attack and that the perpetrators and masterminds be identified and brought to justice. Impunity must not prevail.

I would propose that we adopt a joint statement from the participants of this conference to express our solidarity with Olivera Lakić and the Vijesti team.

Media, however, do not face only physical threats in the region. Economic, political and legal pressure against journalists are still very prevalent and working conditions for journalists are sub-standard almost everywhere.

In most States the polarisation of the press and the control of media outlets by political or big economic interest is detrimental to the independence of the journalist and genuine pluralism.

Public Service Broadcasters are still struggling with financial difficulties and with challenges to their independence.

The region also faces new challenges like media outlets being targeted with cyber-attacks and trolling.

At the same time we have seen the emergence of many new initiatives, the creation of new online media, investigative media, the establishment of a code of ethics, the creation of press councils, media centres and the increased role of trade unions in promoting professional standards. There is, today, a strong dynamic of civil society and

media actors in the Western Balkans working together to develop free media. This is a chance for democracy.

For this chance to be seized there is a clear need for all stakeholders, in particular governments and policy makers, to foster and protect an independent and diverse press. Success will depend on a shared understanding of the essential role of media for democracy.

I am pleased that we have so many representatives from various sectors of society here today — journalists, academics, policymakers and innovators from across the region. A joint approach to addressing media-related challenges in your respective countries and at regional level is of paramount importance.

The key to success during the conference will be to work together through open dialogue. A free media environment does not just appear out of thin air – it is forged by political will and by the perseverance of civil society, business investors and journalists themselves. Media is a common good and serves the interest of every sector of society when it is healthy, free, diverse and protected.

I would add that there is also a strong need to promote more solidarity among journalists.

Ladies and Gentleman,

Over the following two days, expert-led panels will discuss some of the main issues journalists and media workers in the region have been confronting.

Our first panel, organized by the OSCE Mission to Skopje, will address the topic of safety of journalists. There has been little progress in the region when it comes to investigating reported attacks on journalists. During my visit to Podgorica last February I paid tribute to Duško Jovanović from Dan in front of the newspaper office where he was killed in 2004. In Belgrade we honoured the 19th anniversary of the assassination of Slavko Ćuruvija. In both cases, neither perpetrators nor masterminds have been brought to justice.

During this panel we will hear from journalists, first-hand, about the wide range of threats that affect their work, including physical attacks, death threats, pressures they face as a result of their reporting, surveillance and portrayal as state enemies. We will also raise the major issue of the fight against impunity.

Next we will hear from a panel of representatives of journalists' associations and unions about working conditions in the media industry. This session was organized by the OSCE Mission in Kosovo. The journalism profession continues to be characterized by job insecurity, low wages, unpaid overtime work and a lack of contracts. As a result, journalists may be prone to self-censorship, and may even change professions. Bad labour conditions undermine the independence and quality of the media, and make it very difficult to engage in investigative reporting. This panel will go beyond questions of physical security and ask how we can increase journalists' social security.

During the third panel, organized by my Office, we will discuss best practices for Public Service Broadcasters and determine what concrete changes are required so that they can speak with a strong and independent voice. Currently, Public Service Broadcasters

across the region lack sufficient funds and are vulnerable to political interference. In order to serve as watchdogs for the public, public broadcasters must have full editorial independence.

We will then discuss how to enhance media self-regulation and professional standards at the session organized by the OSCE Mission to Montenegro. Panellists will address violations of journalists' code of ethics, and propose strategies for strengthening self-regulatory mechanisms.

Our fifth panel, organized by the OSCE Mission to Serbia, will engage in the topic of digitalization and its impact on freedom of expression. Representatives from some of the most cutting-edge digital media projects will discuss how we might produce and distribute quality journalism online, to positively impact the development of democratic societies.

Finally, our panel on the "fake news" phenomenon, organized by the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, will confront the spread of propaganda and disinformation, which is increasingly prevalent in the region.

Veles, a town less than 200 kilometres from here, grew infamous for producing over a hundred websites with the sole purpose of publishing "fake news" related to the 2016 US elections. How might we debunk "fake news" and prevent it from disrupting electoral processes, and from harming individuals' reputations and privacy? How can we stop disinformation from inciting violence and discrimination? This panel will help

us define a strategy to combat fake news without engaging in censorship of and restrictions on media freedom.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Media freedom faces many obstacles in the region. The aggression against Olivera Lakić is a sad reminder of the high level of risk that press must currently endure.

Despite all of this, I believe that we can open this conference on a promising note: each person in attendance here today demonstrates the value they, their organization and their country place on continuing the fight for a pluralistic and vibrant media landscape in South East Europe.

Today we gather in Struga to combine our efforts and knowledge, to share experience, analysis and opinions, to exchange good practices but also to offer recommendations that will provide clear guidance to the authorities and to the media community on how to improve the state of the media.

I am particularly happy that we can hold the conference in this country, where very important reforms are transforming and opening the media landscape, with respect for the independence of journalists, reform of the Public Service Broadcaster, and support for collective agreements to improve the working conditions of journalists in the press agency. This shows that change is possible, and will hopefully bring inspiration to the whole region.

We will follow all of these transformations with great interest and my Office will continue to provide legal support and assistance on these issues.

Thank you for joining us in Struga, I wish us all a very productive and fruitful conference.