

High-Level OSCE Chairmanship Conference
“Freedom of the Media in the Western Balkans”
in co-operation with the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media
27 February 2017
Hofburg, Vienna

Vienna Conclusions on Safety of Journalists and Media Ethics
22 March 2017

Following the Conference on Media Freedom in the Western Balkans, held in Vienna on 27 February 2017, the Austrian Chairmanship of the OSCE, together with the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, present the following summary of conclusions and best practices:

Free media is essential to an open and free society; no nation can develop democratically without free expression and distribution of ideas and opinions. Journalists have an essential role as public watchdogs and are therefore an integral part of the foundation every democratic society is built on, providing us with information on issues that directly affect our lives.

The High-Level OSCE Chairmanship Conference, organised in close co-operation with the Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media, provided a platform for the sharing of initiatives and best practices from the Southeast Europe region on pertinent media freedom issues affecting countries across the entire OSCE region with a particular focus on the Safety of Journalists and Media Ethics.

In particular, the conference created synergies with journalists, academia, regional experts, civil society networks, and government authorities in the area of media freedom, and provided a forum to showcase the OSCE contribution on the ground to strengthening media environments, including a wide range of media development activities such as supporting governments in reviewing legislation to ensure they are in line with international standards on free expression and monitoring implementation; providing trainings for journalists, law enforcement, lawyers, judges, civil servants, councils, regulators, and other bodies; supporting independent media outlets; engaging with self-regulatory mechanisms to raise professional standards; and holding public discussions on pertinent issues.

Safety of Journalists

The work of journalists often puts them at specific risk of intimidation, harassment, and violence; the presence of which often deters journalists from continuing their work or encourages self-censorship, consequently depriving societies of important information.

Violent attacks against journalists are not confined to areas of armed conflict. In fact, many such cases of violence take place in non-conflict zones. The majority of such attacks target journalists who report on corruption, crime, or sensitive political matters.

In the digital age, journalism is no longer restricted to full-time media professionals but is recognised as being shared by a wide range of actors, including bloggers and others who self-publish on the Internet, in print or through some other medium.

The participants to the conference offered the following recommendations to the OSCE participating States to support improving the safety of journalists:

Condemn, promptly and unequivocally, all attacks and violence against journalists and other media workers, such as torture, killings, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrest and detention, attacks on or forced closure of their offices and media outlets, intimidation, threats and harassment, including online attacks and smear campaigns against journalists.

Demonstrate political commitment to fight impunity by ensuring accountability for crimes committed against journalists, as a key element in preventing future attacks; including through establishment of independent commissions, special prosecutors, specific protocols and methods of investigation and prosecution, and training of prosecutors and the judiciary.

Encourage legislators to create national legal frameworks which protect the right to freedom of expression and strengthen a vibrant, pluralistic media environment. Furthermore, legislation and policies pertaining to media should not be misused to hinder or limit the ability of journalists to perform their work independently and without undue interference.

Acknowledge the specific risks faced by female journalists and its direct impact on media pluralism. To this extent, underline the importance of a gender-sensitive approach when considering measures to address the safety of journalists.

Recognise the particular risks with regard to safety of journalists in the digital age, including the particular vulnerability to unlawful or arbitrary surveillance or interception of communications in violation of their rights to freedom of expression and privacy, and that encryption and anonymity tools have therefore become vital for many journalists to do their work, including to protect the confidentiality of their sources.

Strengthen journalists' unions and labour laws in accordance with international standards. Advocate the improvement of the economic status of journalists, which is critical for ensuring editorial independence and quality journalism. Fear of losing jobs, lack of work contracts, delays in receiving salaries, overtime work, and social insecurity often result in self-censorship.

Media Ethics

The knowledge society of today has a tremendous democratic potential, especially for young people. Media, online and offline, represent social and cultural resources that can empower people, in both their personal development and their development as members of society. In this regard, it is important to create an enabling environment for media professionalism and diversity, promote accurate and balanced reporting.

Upholding of professional standards, however, should in no way come at the expense of the right to free expression. There are a variety of self-regulatory mechanisms which can promote ethical standards in a pluralistic and vibrant media environment.

The participants to the conference offered the following recommendations to OSCE participating States to support strengthening self-regulation and professional ethics of journalists, to deepen media literacy of citizens and to counter hate speech:

Recognise the important role of media self-regulation for journalists and the public. By promoting a set of professional standards, self-regulation can help support the media's credibility. At the same time, self-regulation protects the right of journalists to be independent, and to be judged, not by those in power, but by their peers and their consumers. Additionally, the judgments of self-regulatory bodies can lessen pressure on the judiciary system to sanction journalists for factual errors or unethical reporting. The co-operation between journalists in the field of ethics is also a great training for their co-operation in demanding their legitimate rights from governments. However, quality can never be a pre-requisite for freedom of expression.

Acknowledge that, especially in a technologically driven and media saturated world, citizens need new skills to effectively engage with media and other information providers, including those on the Internet. These new skills can be enhanced through internet and media literacy programmes. Media literacy enhances the creation of knowledge driven, inclusive, pluralistic, democratic, and open societies. Such education activities have to include all citizens – including vulnerable and marginalised groups.

Encourage counter-speech and counter-narratives to tackle the pertinent issue of hate speech and intolerance. Hate speech and intolerance should be primarily countered in a discursive and therefore tolerant way. The role of civil society and media is crucial in actively engaging in public

discourse to rebut and counter prejudiced narratives. Any restrictions on speech have to be very narrow, limited and in strict accordance with international standards.

In conclusion, the Austrian OSCE Chairmanship and the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media offer their reassurances that they will continue to closely cooperate and promote the 2017 Chairmanship priority topic of freedom of expression and freedom of the media, by promoting best practices and enhancing media freedom in further activities planned throughout the year.

Vienna, 22 March 2017.