



Statement by Austria

Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2017

11 September 2017

WORKING SESSION 1:

Freedom of Expression, Free Media and Information

Thank you Chair.

Austria fully aligns herself with the statement made on behalf of the European Union. Nevertheless, I wish to add a few remarks from a national perspective.

Freedom of expression, free media and information are important because democracies can function only when people are well informed and able to access and share information freely.

But to guarantee the right to freedom of expression and to ensure a free and vibrant media landscape takes effort. It needs our action -- to protect journalists, to connect with information, and to believe that our societies are strong enough to withstand hatred and terror without exceptional and excessive measures.

This means, first and foremost, to protect those that tell us the stories we need to hear!

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.

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

We must protect these brave journalists, who tell us the stories we need to know; protect them from intimidation, violence, harassment, imprisonment, and any other arbitrary restrictions.

Second, we need to connect to the information that we need to know!

In the 21st century, this means access to the Internet! By now, this is a prerequisite for receiving, seeking and imparting information. The benefits of the Internet are obvious. It has changed the way we connect with information, connect with each other; how we do business, and how people unite to fundamentally change the way they govern themselves. In our information society an open and accessible Internet is essential for us to connect to the information we need to know.

Thirdly, and overall, we must believe that our societies are strong enough to withstand hatred and terror, without needing exceptional or excessive measures against free speech.

The right to freedom of expression vis-à-vis legitimate security concerns has been coming increasingly to the forefront in view of emerging security threats and challenges, including the fight against extremism and terrorism, hate speech, and much more. In this context, the principles of necessity and proportionality are especially important. Exceptions should not become the norm; they should be just that – exceptions. They need to be defined narrowly and in conformity with these principles.

If we look at the state of media freedom today, it seems we need to be reminded of the value of a diverse, pluralistic, inclusive and vibrant media sphere. We need to facilitate it both at the national and international level.

In this regard, we commend the invaluable work of the OSCE Representative on the Freedom of the Media, Mr Harlem Desir, including his efforts in drawing our attention to new and emerging challenges to freedom of expression, and in giving a voice to those who are silenced.

The activities by the Representative and his team correspond largely with a number of priorities in Austria's human rights policy. I have already touched upon three:

- **Safety of Journalists** - to protect those that tell us the stories we need to hear;
- **Internet Freedom** - to connect to the information that we need to know; and

- **Balance between free speech and national security** – to believe that our societies are strong enough to withstand hatred and terror, without needing exceptional or excessive measures against free speech.

Allow me to conclude by referring to the Vienna Conclusions on Safety of Journalists and Media Ethics, published in March this year following a high-level OSCE conference on *Freedom of the Media in the Western Balkans*.

This concluding document offers a set of recommendations to address issues of safety and media ethics to improve the overall media situation across the OSCE region. We would like to reiterate the following recommendations from this document:

Condemn, promptly and unequivocally, all attacks and violence against journalists.

Demonstrate political commitment to fight impunity by ensuring accountability for crimes committed against journalists.

Encourage legislators to create national legal frameworks which protect the right to freedom of expression and strengthen a vibrant, pluralistic media environment.

Acknowledge the specific risks faced by female journalists and its direct impact on media pluralism.

Recognise the particular risks with regard to safety of journalists in the digital age, including violations of their rights to freedom of expression and privacy.

Encourage counter-speech and counter-narratives to tackle the pertinent issue of hate speech and intolerance.

Thank you Chair.