

Welcoming remarks for 22nd Central Asia Media Conference

7 – 9 October 2020



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Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Colleagues,

It is my pleasure to open the 22nd Central Asia Media Conference. Normally, a conference like this would be opened by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. But in the current situation, where we are temporarily without an appointed Representative, it is my honour, as the Director of the Office to welcome you to our 22nd Central Asia Media Conference which will be taking place over the next three days.

Today, we should have in fact all been meeting in Uzbekistan where this year's media conference was planned to take place. Let me take this opportunity to thank the Uzbek authorities for their generous offer, and I hope that we will soon be able to come back to it. However, due to the present circumstances, the health risks and uncertainties, we are gathering in a different format. In order to be able to continue our important work even under these challenging circumstances, we have decided to move our meeting online. I am nevertheless looking forward to several days of lively discussions, and interesting opinions and analyses of the current media freedom situation in Central Asia and Mongolia.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It has been an extraordinary year, which has affected every country and every family within the OSCE area, and the situation is unfortunately far from over. The COVID-19 pandemic

has hit the media hard, and following the subsequent downsizing or closure of media outlets, the same applies to individual media workers. I am aware of the efforts undertaken by governments in this region to keep the economy afloat and provide relief to vulnerable groups. I am also aware of heart-warming cross-border initiatives of solidarity among journalists helping one another get through these tough times.

The pandemic brought to the fore, and often intensified, tendencies and trends, which have been present in the region for some time, but it has also highlighted the importance of a free flow of information and of access to quality information.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a grave impact on the freedom to report. It is paramount that we strike the right balance and that, when fighting disinformation, we do not prevent the free flow of reliable information. A joint statement issued by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and other international media freedom mandate holders on 19 March clearly states that “any attempts to criminalize information relating to the pandemic may create distrust in institutional information, delay access to reliable information and have a chilling effect on freedom of expression”.

In particular, the statement called on governments to combine their best practices and commit themselves to reforms, offering several points for action and collaboration. To develop this recommendation further, specific next steps in consultation with the media and citizens should be considered. In particular, on the issue of data transparency related to the pandemic, journalists should have unrestricted access not only to the current number of cases within a certain area, but also to other measures taken to combat the disease, such as emergency procurement procedures and the decisions that are being made, and by whom.

The communication and compilation of best practices will help governments globally to strike the right balance between transparency and privacy, in the public interest.

We shall discuss the matter in more detail during *our third session* on 9 October.

Before that, in the first and second sessions, we will look into two pertinent issues, which often resurface whenever societies go through periods of upheaval.

The second session, which will take place tomorrow, on 8 October, will deal with access to the media by minority groups, which again, has an immediate link to the current pandemic, protection of lives and providing timely and accurate information to citizens.

International human rights norms prohibit discrimination based on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, including association with a national minority, property, birth or other status.

Various events and developments over the past decade have confirmed the continued relevance of these commitments: including intolerance towards the Roma and other groups of Travellers; persisting gender inequality, the lack of equality before the law for various marginalized groups; non-recognition of national minorities or the rise in xenophobia due to a recent influx of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees from conflict – to name just a few.

These challenges have been exacerbated by a climate of anxiety and fear created by the global fight against terrorism and has resulted in the erosion in government and public support for human rights more broadly. In such a context, quality journalism must be supported together with media initiatives geared towards ethical journalism. We will also jointly explore with our speakers how the inclusion of various minorities in the media landscape and the creation of more employment opportunities for minorities can contribute to this end.

Today, *the first session*, which is about to start right after the opening remarks, will focus on countering a phenomenon fueled by every crisis and broadly labelled ‘hate speech’ and other types of harmful content. With the rise of digital technologies, there is no doubt about the positive expansion of the possibilities to communicate and to be heard. Ever more people can access, share and disseminate information and ideas.

The digital revolution, however, has also brought new challenges when it comes to freedom of expression and media freedom. One of the key questions today is how to curtail the dissemination and spread of violent extremism and the enormous quantity of hateful rhetoric. The answer is not an easy one, and, as we are talking about cross-national phenomena, they need to be addressed both at the national and international level.

We need to know how to maintain a level playing field and an open internet. This includes bridging the gap between a whole range of different national legislations, while terms of service put in place by platforms operating across these jurisdictions. We must remember that recourse can be found in international law, which provides guidance for the delicate balance between the State’s obligation to protect its citizens against unlawful and harmful content, such as hate speech or incitement to terrorism on the one hand, and the freedom of expression and free media – which are paramount to any well-functioning society – on the other hand.

National regulations aimed at limiting and eliminating harmful content have been in use for decades. However, recently, they have been updated and largely tightened in many OSCE participating States.

These regulations mainly concern legal provisions that seek to deter incitement of inter-ethnic, racial, regional and social enmity. However, they also include legal provisions on terrorist and extremist propaganda, in particular *disseminated by* the media, as well as the possession of certain materials deemed extremist or terrorist.

Under similar regulations, journalists and other critical voices have been prosecuted for “liking” social media posts of allegedly extremist content. Websites have been blocked for the so-called hosting of extremist content, which limits the public’s right to information, as well as journalists’ rights to disseminate information in the public interest.

In every situation and regardless of national differences, it is essential to identify cases where the application of such regulations would run counter to the public interest to know how and where such regulations unduly restrict the right of citizens to express their opinion. This

would also include the right of journalists to expose corruption, arbitrary application of justice and other abuses of power.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our thanks go to our colleagues in Central Asia and Mongolia, who supported us and shared their short videos reflecting on certain issues relevant to the forthcoming discussions. You will be able to see these videos throughout our conference. We are equally grateful to our speakers spanning six countries and four time zones, who have offered to share their expertise with us and our moderators who will be steering our debates.

I would like to note that this conference would have been impossible without the financial support of Sweden.

Finally, my thanks go to the colleagues in the delegations to the OSCE in Vienna and our field missions in Central Asia for their invaluable support, as well as to my professional and dedicate team without whom none of this would have been possible.

I wish you substantive and enjoyable discussions.

Thank you for your attention.