



WELCOME SPEECH
8th South East Europe Media Conference
11 October 2021, Tirana

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me wish you a good morning and warmly welcome you all to our 8th South East Europe Media Conference, jointly hosted by the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and the OSCE Presence in Albania, in collaboration with the OSCE field operations from this region.

I want to start my opening speech with a question, something I have been pondering over this weekend. Was last Friday a good or a bad day for media freedom?

A good day, one could argue, the day on which journalists Dmitry Muratov and Maria Ressa were rightfully awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, for their courageous work and relentless defending of media freedom. A good day, because the Nobel Committee specifically referred to the freedom of expression and all those people who stand up for this fundamental right, in a world in which democracy and freedom of the press face increasingly adverse conditions.

A sad sign of the time, however, one could also argue. A time where strong, independent and trustworthy journalism is often deprived from serving the public interest, contributing to a more informed, and active citizenry and as the watchdog that holds those in power to account, thereby ensuring a rich, pluralistic and transparent media landscape.

Such a prize is needed to underline once more that, journalists' ability to perform their work is threatened by a set of old and new interlocking challenges that have placed journalism in an increasingly precarious position. Unfortunately, this is truer than ever.

Also across the OSCE region, I witness a growing hostile environment for the media. There is fraying public trust and growing anti-media sentiment, exacerbated by disinformation that is circulating at an ever-increasing speed and a far-reaching scale. This negative trend is coupled with mounting violence, harassment and pressure against journalists specifically those investigating instances of corruption and malfeasance in both the public and the private sector.

Moreover, in the online sphere we witness the same dangerous developments particularly targeting women journalists, who continue to face additional gender-specific threats and abuse.

These trends have a dramatic impact on public interest activities. They create a climate of fear and self-censorship, threaten journalism's core democratic function, and deprive the public from the crucial information they need for their full participation in our societies.

All of this merits our continued attention and engagement. We need to strongly promote independent media and sustain public-interest journalism across all

media channels, including radio, television, print and digital platforms. In other words, I clearly see an urgent need to step up for journalism and independent, free and pluralistic media.

This year's South East Europe Media Conference, on "Journalism in times of crisis", therefore serves to reaffirm the importance of journalism as an essential public good and as a crucial pillar of democratic societies.

Fortunately, it is not only bad developments that we are discussing in the coming two days. Who has the youth, has the future, they say but to tell you frankly I think that who has the youth has the present. Therefore, I am particularly pleased to have a group of excellent young journalists on board at this year's conference. Their engagement in the public sphere is essential to build more inclusive and robust democratic societies. For that reason, today, during a parallel working session – organized within the framework of the "Youth Trail" project of the OSCE Presence in Albania – young journalists from the South East Europe region will embark on an important task to develop their position paper on how to preserve the value of journalism as a public good for all. The outline of this paper will be presented at our closing session tomorrow and stir the discussions on the future of journalism through the lens of young journalists.

This is the second time that the conference takes place in Tirana, and the very first one for myself since I started my mandate as OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media this year.

Despite the challenging circumstances due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, I am pleased we have managed to bring excellent speakers and moderators from the region and beyond, to share their expertise with us and steer our discussions during the two-day's event. I am also very pleased to welcome our distinguished

high-level guests and representatives from the Albanian media community joining us in-person today, as well as other important stakeholders from across the South East Europe region and beyond who are following us now online.

I am very much looking forward to our two days exchange, which will provide us all with an opportunity to reflect on the ongoing reforms, persisting or evolving challenges and viable solutions to them. The outputs from all of us here will enable myself and my Office to offer tailored assistance and support, in order to strengthen media freedom in line with the commitments the participating States of our organization, the OSCE, have agreed and adopted over time.

Lastly, I would like to thank my team and the colleagues at the OSCE Presence who have made this conference happen.

Thank you very much.