21st Central Asia Media Conference, Bishkek

Opening remarks by Harlem Désir, 17 July 2019

Your Excellencies,
Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very happy to open the 21st Central Asia Media Conference today in Bishkek with the Minister of Culture, Information and Tourism, Azamat Zhamankulov, and the First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nuran Niyazaliev, together with the Head of the OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek, Ambassador Pierre von Arx.

I also want to thank the Head of the OSCE Programme Office in Nur-Sultan, Ambassador György Szabó, the Project Coordinator in Uzbekistan, Ambassador John Mac Gregor, for their support to the organization of this conference and their presence today.

I thank the minister of Foreign Affairs, Chingiz Aidarbekov, for his support to this event, as well as the Kyrgyz Permanent Representative to the OSCE, Ambassador Bakyt Dzhusupov, for his participation in the conference today.

And I want to thank all the participants, journalists, media actors and civil society representatives, coming from the five countries of the region and Mongolia, as well as the experts who join us from other OSCE participating States.

I am particularly pleased to be here in Bishkek, where my Office organized the very first Central Asia Media Conference in 1999. Since then, this event has become a unique annual forum in Central Asia to discuss media freedom and freedom of expression, attracting participants from the whole region.

Since our last meeting in Nur-Sultan, in November last year, the developments in the sphere of freedom of the media have been much differentiated and contrasted depending on the countries in Central Asia.

We have seen improvements in some countries, but we are still facing restrictions to the activities of journalists and media in other parts of the region. In the past year, I had to intervene with States' authorities about different cases of blocking of websites, prosecution of journalists, detentions, or fines.

At the same time, several steps taken by some States show that improvement is indeed possible and duly noted, both at home and abroad. This is why we are particularly happy to hold this conference here, in Kyrgyzstan where we have seen important progress in the field of media freedom in the past years.

During this conference, we want to discuss the many challenges that media development and media freedom face at this time of digital transformation; a transformation that also has an enormous potential for the media and the information sphere in the region.

We will look at different aspects of this new reality which can bring a lot of possibilities for new and diverse media to arise and to contribute to the democratic development of societies.

We will also examine the challenges for legacy media, for the future of journalism, for the financial sustainability of the media, and for the quality of information of the citizens.

Freedom of the media and freedom of expression are indispensable foundations for democratic society. Opening the media landscape, allowing more space for diverse media, even if we are facing many difficulties and challenges, is a necessity for the entire region.

I am also convinced that free media, openness and access to information will be supportive of economic development. Free information and circulation of ideas also encourage innovation and new initiatives in the economic field. Respect for freedom of the press is also seen as a key element of respect for the rule of law by international investors.

For this to happen, we need legal frameworks and media policies that are enabling media freedom, that are supportive of diversity and pluralism, and that accept the role of media to investigate, to report freely on issues of public interest, and to hold those in power accountable.

The OSCE commitments in the field of media freedom are our common guidelines in this regard and must be used as a tool to protect the journalists' rights, to reform legislation and to open more widely the media landscape.

Let me outline the specific topics that will be addressed at this year's conference, which we will conclude with recommendations based on our discussions in plenaries and working groups.

The first panel will focus on the impact of new technologies and digitalization on media pluralism, quality of information, and business models of the media.

New technologies are driving the creation of new forms of media, and new models of media consumption. They have expanded the possibilities for people everywhere to access information and ideas, to communicate and to be heard.

They can contribute to fulfilling the vision of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "*Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.*"

But this abundance of information and sources, without any differentiation or prioritisation, also creates new challenges and risks:

- How do we address the digital dissemination of violent extremist content, terrorist propaganda and the enormous quantity of hateful rhetoric?

- How do we tackle the problems of disinformation, fake news and viral deception?

- How do we ensure media diversity in an economic environment that has financially devastated the media landscape and the resources available for professional journalism?

These issues will be addressed in the second session, which will consider the rapidly changing legal environment for online media and the regulation of online content.

Many governments are considering imposing regulation on social media platforms, often blamed for facilitating the dissemination of illegal content, enabling the manipulation of information, and of democratic process. There is a legislative trend in many countries to impose fines, to block access to websites, and to impose liability on Internet intermediaries that would fail to limit the distribution of certain content.

We will look at ways to combat violent or extremist content while preserving freedom of expression. We will discuss the different levels of action and their specific constraints: the legislation, the self-regulation mechanisms, and the responsibilities of Internet intermediaries.

It's legitimate to ask Internet companies to do more in combating terrorist propaganda or hate speech, but we should not ask them to shape the future of freedom of expression. They are and should remain intermediaries, not the publishers of every citizen's opinions, who will decide, under many pressures, what can or cannot be said.

This would be a dangerous path.

I would like to use this conference to reiterate my call that any model of national online regulation must include international human rights standards, in particular, those pertaining to freedom of expression.

We need more international understanding of what we want the companies to do, and we need a dialogue among States, civil society and private actors to ensure interoperability and efficiency in the regulation of the Internet.

I had to intervene several times in the past year on issues of blockings of websites in the region. This remains a widespread problem.

It's of utmost importance to ensure that access to the global internet is guaranteed in all countries and to avoid fragmentation of the internet.

I am also concerned about instances of detention and sometimes of conviction of bloggers and online journalists, who may express opinions contrary to those held by the majority in the country.

Journalism, online or offline, needs more safety. Both physical and legal safety. Challenges to journalists' safety are manifold.

Unfortunately, since our previous conference, there have been several cases of physical attacks against journalists including attack on a female journalist.

Safety of journalists also means that they must be preserved from undue criminal investigations and from unjustified detentions, and, for their online safety, that they must be preserved from being exposed to threats and verbal abuse resulting from their work and comments on social media. Female journalists are frequently targets of such verbal attacks.

I hope that some of these stories, that we will hear during this conference, will push us forward in calling for better protection and, crucially, for action from governments to ensure that journalists can work in a safe environment.

Just last year, at the OSCE Ministerial Council in Milan, the 57 participating States adopted a landmark Decision on Safety of Journalists. Now, we need to implement this Decision in all OSCE participating States.

In the afternoon we will have two working groups, which will help us work in a closer circle.

One of the working groups will look at the ways to preserve and reflect the complex and pluralist societies in Central Asia, and at the ways to help media avoid harmful content.

The second group will discuss effective self-regulatory mechanisms for online media, as an instrument for the promotion of ethical standards in the digital environment.

Later in the afternoon and tomorrow morning, we will discuss media freedom developments in each of the represented countries, including current legislation and individual legal cases faced by media outlets and journalists, which may have a chilling effect on freedom of the media. We will give the floor to representatives of civil society and provide representatives of the state bodies from the country concerned with a possibility to react.

At the outcome of the conference, we will provide policy recommendations to effectively deal with these challenges.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In order to place freedom of expression and media freedom issues higher on the political agenda of governments, we all need to join our efforts.

We need this open and frank discussion with all stakeholders and that's why these conferences have been so important for 21 years. Today, the region must not miss the rendezvous with the digital transformation of the media. It is vital for the future of information, of democracy and of the economy of all the countries.

I believe that a mature, dynamic and vibrant media landscape is a condition for quality of information and of democracy, and a highly relevant component of the OSCE concept of comprehensive security. Access to quality and diverse information reinforce the resilience of societies confronted with security challenges.

I thank all of you for being here and contributing to this debate today and tomorrow, and I look forward to the discussions ahead.

Thank you.