

Check Against Delivery!

Opening Remarks by

Ambassador Christian Strohal

Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

at the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on

Freedom of the Media:

Protection of Journalists and Access to Information

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Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a pleasure for me to be able to be here and to highlight excellent cooperation which the ODIHR enjoys with the Representative on the Freedom of Media and his Office.

Human rights and fundamental freedoms play a key role in the community of values that is the OSCE. In the last 30 years this community of now 56 states has made numerous commitments on democracy and human rights which include, and sometimes go beyond, the guarantees provided for in the legally binding international human-rights instruments.

Not only are these commitments an acknowledgement of the importance of these freedoms, but they also form the basis of our work. When I say our, I am talking about all of us here in this room and of course many more outside. And unfortunately, there is still no reason, in spite of so much effort, to assume that these commitments have been fully implemented. Instead, we are facing new challenges to the very rights and freedoms we have been trying to protect and promote.

All OSCE participating States are committed to guaranteeing citizens such basic rights as the freedom of assembly and association; however, these commitments have not always been met in practice. For example: In some cases, new laws aimed at fighting terrorism or combating violent extremism have prevented people from gathering or from holding peaceful demonstrations. Some laws have also imposed new requirements on NGO registration and reporting. In other cases, individuals have been prevented from forming political parties, especially when in opposition. Curtailing such rights and freedoms impairs the development of democracy and of security. It undermines democratic elections – a necessity for the legitimacy of any government – and is harmful for ensuring vibrant civil society as well as for the activities of human rights defenders.

Why am I mentioning this at a meeting on the freedom of the media? Because we can not look at one particular right or freedom in isolation from others. It is a well-recognised principle of international human rights law that human rights are indivisible. Human rights and fundamental freedoms are closely linked to each other and they are mutually re-enforcing; infringement on one human right or fundamental freedom often leads directly to the infringement of another. If the freedom of association is not respected in a particular country, for

example, freedom of expression may be affected adversely as well. And how can we advocate the freedom of assembly if there is no freedom of expression and opinion?

Let me give you another example: In its first working session, this meeting is looking at access to information. If it takes 4 weeks to clear a carload of this organization's publications through 3 different custom offices in one of its member states, Belarus, as we have just experienced, we have a case of impediment to this fundamental freedom. Furthermore, the publications in question are based on the very commitments the OSCE has made to protect and promote this and other freedoms.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

We met here, in this room, a few months ago, to talk about one of the key groups in promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms, i.e. national human rights institutions and in particular human rights defenders who often face excessive and unjustified restrictions on their activities, including the application of restrictions on the freedoms of assembly and association.

Another obstacle faced by human rights defenders is their portrayal by some governments as unpatriotic traitors in an attempt to sway public opinion against the activities of certain groups or even against the individuals themselves. We have seen examples of such tactics not only in relation to human rights defenders trying to identify and expose current human rights violations but also with regard to those who are trying to uncover past violations. I am fully aware that some of you here today have experienced the very same attitudes and obstacles when it comes to your work.

My office, the ODIHR, supports efforts to protect fundamental freedoms, such as the freedoms of assembly and association, religion and belief in a number of ways, including by offering expert legal advice to governments and OSCE field operations and by organizing meetings that provide a forum to discuss problem areas and suggest relevant solutions. Our work with governments and with civil society is to serve as a constant reminder of the commitments that have been made in their name.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In early May, my Office, together with the Personal Representative to the OSCE CiO on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against

Muslims, convened a joint meeting with representatives of Muslim communities to discuss strategies to promote a more accurate and balanced representation of their communities in the media. The media have a tremendous potential to help shift attitudes, a potential we can use to make our communities inclusive, cohesive, successful and tolerant.

In this context, I would like to draw your attention to a side event the ODIHR is organizing tomorrow between 12 and 1pm which serves to highlight practical guides and tools for journalists to use when reporting on religious or cultural issues. One of the tools to be presented is a Media Guide on Britain's Muslim Communities. The other tool which will be presented is a Charter on Freedom of Expression and Journalistic Ethics in Relation to Respect for Religion or Belief.

As the son of a journalist, it is a particular pleasure for me to be here today and to be together with a distinguished journalist, my colleague Miklos Haraszti. Having grown up in a household that was living the importance of freedom of expression, it is my firm conviction that freedom of expression is crucial in order to make, to protect, and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms effectively if our societies, old and new democracies, flourish. The freedom of expression, including the freedom of the media in particular, is one of the pillars of democratic society. And while this right should not be restricted unduly in the name of fighting terrorism and violent extremism, it also needs to be exercised with a certain degree of responsibility.

This brings me to a second side-event that the ODIHR will organise tomorrow between 1 and 2pm on Media Coverage of Anti-Terrorism Issues. One of the issues that will be looked at this event is the issue of media responsibility and the balance between freedom of expression and the right to be informed on the one hand, and the right to a fair trial with an impartial tribunal on the other.

Both of the ODIHR's side events will take place consecutively in Room 201. Let me invite you all warmly to these two interesting events.

I am looking forward to our further discussions.

Thank you