

ENGLISH only



Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting

Freedom of the Media: Protection of Journalists and Access to Information

Vienna, 13-14 July 2006

Opening remarks by Frank Geerkens,
Head of the OSCE Chairmanship Task Force

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our global world spins on rapid information flows and complex communication technologies. Information, more than ever, means power. Media are powerful agents in our societies. The media are known as ‘the Fourth Estate’ which refers to the power structure during the Ancien regime, but in our modern democratic societies, the media is certainly as well a fourth power, complementing if not confronting the traditional three branches of power, the legislative, the executive and the judiciary.

The role of the media is multifold. The media hold political and other public leaders accountable. Accountability and democratic transparency encourage good governance and trust between citizens and public authority. The media are also instrumental in the emancipation and – allow me the expression – enlightenment of the people. Media are, indeed, an important factor of empowerment of citizens. Media also allow for the expression of dissent, a fundamental right in open and pluralistic societies that is conducive to peace and stability.

Because of its influence and power, the media are sometimes feared and even kept under the thumb, threatened or harassed. Optimal conditions for media to function are not always and everywhere a reality, it's a challenge both East and West of Vienna.

Due to the media's vital role, the OSCE has incorporated the media in its body of commitments and its array of activities. The office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media, founded in 1997, is the central operator – and foremost guardian – of the work of the OSCE in the field of the media. Indeed, media freedom is the premise and the precondition of properly functioning media. Without genuine independence and pluralism, the media will be just or even less than paper tigers.

Mr. Miklos Haraszti, the OSCE's Representative on Freedom of the Media, and his office have been doing an outstanding job, which I would like to formally but also wholeheartedly recognize on the occasion of this special meeting.

The OSCE field missions, too, have launched a series of initiatives in the area of freedom of the media: offering technical facilities, organizing media management trainings or meetings to discuss media reform.

Other OSCE institutions also are important contributors to the promotion of the freedom of the media: the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in the first place, through media monitoring in the lead-up to elections and through other actions.

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It is both a pleasure and an honour to welcome the representatives of these respective institutions here, as well as the many media practitioners and representatives from civil society at large.

The Belgian OSCE Chairmanship has encouraged the organization of this Supplementary Human Dimension Implementation Meeting because of the importance we attach to freedom of the media and the activities of the OSCE Representative Mr. Haraszti. Aside from providing the impetus for this meeting, we also wish to initiate an OSCE-wide program to promote direct contacts between media professionals from East and West of Vienna. Peer-to-peer contacts could contribute to capacity building of the media. The OSCE is fulfilling important missions of capacity building with regard to the three traditional branches of power, the 'fourth power' might also find an interest in this approach.

The Chairmanship believes that more attention could indeed be invested in media development, because of the media's instrumental role in materializing OSCE goals and values. We believe that media development is a litmus test of democratization and liberalizations efforts. Moreover, media development and reform facilitates, and paves the way for, democratization, human rights, and regional stability.

The focus of this meeting is on protection of journalists and access to information. These two interlinked issues give tangible meaning to the perhaps somewhat abstract concept of media freedom. On both issues there is a significant gap between what the OSCE participating States have subscribed to, and what happens on the ground.

I would like to point out that protecting journalists and granting unimpeded access to information is not only of benefit to media practitioners. The interests of the general public are certainly also at stake. People are entitled to information.

Of course this entitlement implies certain responsibilities of the media vis-à-vis society. This brings me to the special session of this meeting, in which a panel of high-profile speakers will discuss voluntary professional standards to promote mutual respect and understanding without affecting freedom of expression. Self-regulation indeed appears to be the most promising method to tackle intercultural challenges while ensuring that the media remains free from governmental control. I look forward to a lively debate on this topic, which can bring us closer to finding appropriate answers for the future.

From a Belgian point of view, a problem that merits our particular attention today and tomorrow is the protection of journalists' sources. Journalists have to be able to keep their sources confidential, even on controversial issues, in order to exercise their profession appropriately, and in turn performing their public duty by meeting the people's right to know. The Belgian legislation in this regard is advanced, and I look forward to the Secretary General of the Belgian Union of Professional Journalists, Mr. Pol Deltour telling us more about how this legislation came about.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish you a warm welcome to this meeting and trust it will be rewarding.