



THE 2018 HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING

Working Session 3: Freedom of the Media (11/09/2018)

Tars Van Litsenborgh

A free, independent media is essential for providing ordinary citizens with the information they need to make decisions for their future and hold their governments to account.

However, freedom of the media is restricted in a number of OSCE participating states, where expression of alternative viewpoints and criticism of authorities is seen as a threat. Independent journalists and media organisations are censored, or forced into self-censorship, limiting the free flow of information and discussion on matters of public interest.¹

Often, these restrictions are framed within the context of the need to promote national security and counter terrorist interests.

Whilst some States argue that the intended goal of these restrictions is the improvement of 'social harmony' as well as safeguarding security, in actual fact such measures often *undermine* the safety and equality of individuals and the media. In some cases, mechanisms have been set up to identify and refer content to Internet and social media companies for removal. In other cases, anti-blasphemy, anti-apostasy, or counter-terrorism laws are used to prosecute opinions or beliefs expressed in online forums. Humanist and freethinking journalists, writers, and bloggers have particularly suffered from the latter. Alarming, online speech, usually expressed through social media websites, can also lead to offline mob violence. The securitisation of online activity has provided a wide margin of operation for national authorities without proper scrutiny.

Not only is freedom of the media a value too precious to be sacrificed, but crucially, freedom of the media is a *positive resource* for strengthening societal cohesion, reinforcing public trust and reconciling respect for human rights as a means of promoting national security and enhancing public safety.

As the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media has noted, restrictions based on non-defined terms such as "extremism", "incitement" or "terrorism" are deeply problematic and must be avoided. As a positive measure, we recommend OSCE participating states consult the UN's Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.

Organized terrorism is a curse for all of civilized society. But we cannot let it be used as an excuse for states who wish to silence critical media outlets or erode the precious rights we seek to protect in the face of such terrorism.

¹ <https://www.article19.org/resources/central-asia-governments-must-uphold-commitments-protect-journalists/>