



## RECOMMENDATIONS

This document summarizes the main considerations and recommendations debated by over 100 representatives of governments, journalists and members of civil society from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Mongolia, as well as international experts. These recommendations were discussed at the 21st annual Central Asia Media Conference organized by the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, on 17-18 July 2019 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The main theme of this year's event was media freedom and pluralism in times of digital transformation. The topics included digital transformation of the media landscape and journalism, regulation of online content, self-regulation as well as media for minorities.

The new and still-evolving media ecosystem is much more complex than anything the media community has seen before. The Internet, social media and mobile telephony have enabled growing numbers to express themselves and reach (potentially) the whole connected world with their individual messages.

Many new forms of media services have emerged. The Internet also opens opportunities and lowers barriers of entry for new media organizations or individuals.

With the abundance of available sources of information, the question of the quality of information is more crucial than ever. Fact-checking, editorial control, self-regulation based on professional standards and ethical journalism are key to enhance the audience's trust in online media.

For users and media worldwide, the protection of the public interest and access to a secure and open internet is also decisive. This brings about the issue of affordable and stable Internet access for public and media alike.

We need to ensure that freedom of expression and media freedom, as foundations of democracy, are promoted and safeguarded in the changing environment throughout the region.

The main recommendations are summarized through the following points:

### **1. An affordable Internet**

To help close the digital divide, all participating States in the region should promote Internet access that is universal, unrestricted and affordable to all. A robust infrastructure is needed as well as economic support to ensure that access to communication is possible for all. To ensure equitable, universal and affordable access to the Internet, the participating States

should prioritize policies that create incentives for build-up in the private sector, and to invest in order to close the gap in Internet access. States should:

- Consider new policies or subsidies for communications services for low-income households.
- Refrain from imposing Internet or telecommunication network disruptions and shutdowns.

## **2. Equal opportunity online for media and service providers**

Net Neutrality protections are the bedrock of a free and open internet that puts internet users first. Net Neutrality prevents internet service providers from blocking, slowing down or discriminating against content. At its best, an open and neutral internet helps put democracy into action, allowing new ideas to be shared, information to be accessible, and government services to be accessed. It is also a driver of economic innovation, providing extremely low barriers to entry for start-ups and small businesses.

The participating States are therefore called upon to:

- Establish and implement Net Neutrality rules under the law.
- Resist gated access to the online world, such as the practice of providing limited connectivity by only permitting access to certain websites or services.

## **3. Protection of Digital Privacy**

Digitalization of information and communication should not be used to establish surveillance of citizens, users or journalists. Participating States should establish or reinforce laws to prevent these abuses. Violations of privacy rights are also commonplace in the private sector. Both ad-funded platforms and internet service providers compile huge amounts of information on users. Privacy is a human right. The participating States are called upon to:

- Renounce mass surveillance of Internet users' and journalists' data.
- Support comprehensive privacy legislation giving people meaningful control, protections, transparency and the means to assert their rights over the collection and use of all private data.
- In line with Article 8 of the OSCE Ministerial Council Decision No.3/18 on Safety of Journalists, adopted in December 2018 in Milan, participating States should: "Refrain from arbitrary or unlawful interference with journalists' use of encryption and anonymity technologies and refrain from employing unlawful or arbitrary surveillance techniques, noting that such acts infringe on the journalists' enjoyment of human rights, and could put them at potential risk of violence and threats to their safety."

## **4. Protection of Freedom of Expression and Media Freedom in the Digital Environment:**

Digital technologies have opened new opportunities of free expression and access to information, but they have also brought new challenges and risks such as the spread of false information, viral deception, terrorist propaganda and hateful speech dissemination. There is no simple answer to these phenomena. The main antidote is the support to quality and diverse

free media, professional journalism based on ethical standards, fact-checking initiatives and media literacy.

The participating States should:

- Ensure protection of freedom of expression online in domestic legislation in accordance with international standards. This includes limiting criminal law restrictions on free speech and not deterring public debate about matters of public interest.
- Respect international human rights standards when seeking to regulate or influence expression on online media platforms.
- Ensure that all legislation aimed at making private Internet intermediaries more transparent and accountable regarding content moderation should comply with international standards on freedom of expression.
- Ensure that independent public service media are able to fulfil their public service remit in the online environment.
- Devote significantly greater attention and resources to media-literacy, to address the particular literacy challenges of the digital communications environment.
- Ensure that all forms of public subsidies to media are allocated without political interference in a manner that respects the independence of media and supports the adaptation of media to the online environment, pluralism and diversity, gender equality, self-regulation and reinforcement of professional standards.

## **5. Media Self-Regulation in the Digital Environment:**

Self-regulation should be encouraged in the media communities. Effective and independent self-regulatory instruments established by the media themselves, such as media councils, acting on the basis of professional standards and journalistic ethical codes, should be introduced or supported wherever they exist, to facilitate a flexible and non-intrusive framework of regulation. In Central Asia, despite efforts to establish viable and effective bodies of self-regulation, these have as yet to take root

Media and civil society should:

- Consider increasing the role of self-regulation in preventing litigations involving media organisations.
- Ensure that codes of professional standards for media and journalists are updated to include online media and social media and that bloggers and other non-professional social communicators are able to join, if they so wish, mechanisms of self-regulation for the media.
- Encourage the development of transparent, independent, accountable and participatory self-regulatory initiatives for the oversight of content moderation decisions on social media.
- Support journalists in developing online safety skills.

## **6. Media Diversity, Including Minority Media:**

Local media plays a key role in social and democratic life of communities. The public needs access to diverse news sources that are locally controlled and reflective of community needs.

Authorities and other stakeholders should strive to support or create a free and diverse local communication environment to reflect the needs of citizens in complex modern societies. In particular, *the participating States are called upon to:*

- Support legislation to promote diversity of media-ownership.
- Support anti-trust efforts; promote enforcement action to end monopolistic abuses.
- Ensure that media regulators are independent, committed to promoting media diversity.
- Support diversity in society, so that intolerance is tackled in an exemplary manner.

*Media organisations, on their part, are called upon to:*

- Improve diversity on editorial boards in order to create fair and objective reports covering minorities' issues.
- Encourage diversity reporting, including that on the most challenging issues related to intercommunity relations, minority rights, tolerance, and other diversity issues.