



15th Central Asia Media Conference

Reflecting on OSCE media freedom commitments

Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
27-28 June 2013

15th ANNIVERSARY DECLARATION

The 15th Central Asia Media Conference, organized by the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media in co-operation with the OSCE Centre in Bishkek and assistance of the OSCE field offices in Central Asia, was held on 27-28 June 2013 in Bishkek.

More than 100 participants, including international media experts, government officials, academics, journalists and civil society representatives from all Central Asian states convened for the two-day event. A representative of Mongolia also participated for the first time.

The Central Asia Media Conference, important annual event organized by the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, has been held in Central Asian participating States since 1999. Throughout the years, the conferences have addressed topics central to media freedom, including “Pluralism and Internet governance,” “Access to information and new technologies,” “Journalism education”, “New challenges in broadcasting, including public service broadcasting and the digital switchover” and others.

The 15th conference was devoted to looking back at media developments in Central Asia in general and, more specifically, the effect of the activities of the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media on media freedom across the region.

Conference participants worked in groups to consider media freedom issues and take stock of issues raised during previous conferences by reviewing prior declarations and identifying the major media development issues in their countries. They discussed how changes in technology and social media have changed the media landscape and how regulation might address these developments. In the end, they adopted the following recommendations.

The Conference participants:

1. Emphasize that the right of journalists, working both off and online, to carry out their activities under safe conditions is a fundamental condition precedent to free media and free expression.
2. Call on the governments to ensure swift and effective investigations of crimes against journalists. It is vital that the authorities publicly condemn every case of violence against journalists to send a clear message that such assaults are not tolerated and

perpetrators will be brought to justice to prevent a climate of intimidation, fear and impunity.

3. Urge governments to bring national legislation in line with OSCE commitments on media freedom and freedom of expression and refrain from adopting legislation that would restrict free media and free expression. While the right to freedom of expression may be restricted by international law, such restrictions can only be justified if prescribed by law, pursue a legitimate aim and are necessary in a democratic society.
4. Stress that while the fight against terrorism, violent extremism and the defense of national security are legitimate goals, media freedom should not be abridged in pursuit thereof.
5. Underline that national laws should facilitate openness and accessibility of the Internet, including online media. Speech-friendly Internet regulation should be promoted.
6. Reiterate that defamation should be decriminalized in the countries where it still remains a criminal offense (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). Only civil defamation laws should govern speech offenses and should include clearly defined provisions allowing for “reasonable and proportional damage awards” to be applied in defamation cases.
7. Emphasize that public figures are required to tolerate more, not less, criticism, in part because of the need for free discussion on issues of public interest.
8. Underline the importance of the right of access to information and calls on governments to facilitate freer and wider dissemination of information.
9. Stress that in the switch from analog to digital broadcasting, national regulators should take practical steps to increase pluralism of content and prevent concentration of ownership in broadcast properties.
10. Following the example of Kyrgyzstan, call upon legislators and governments to introduce public service broadcasting as a pivotal part of national media systems to promote pluralism and media freedom, and promotes transitioning state-run media (which serves the government) into public service media (which serves the public) to meet this goal where appropriate.
11. Call on the governments to encourage private media, promote fair competition in the media market and avoid government interference in media content.
12. Emphasize that in order to improve working conditions for journalists, authorities should favorably consider visa requests from foreign journalists.
13. Highlight the importance of effective self-regulatory mechanisms, such as press councils and ombudspersons. They should be established in a consultative and inclusive process and should be independent from government interests.

14. Encourage governments to improve quality of journalism education and Internet literacy programs for the general public.
15. Stress the importance that the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media to continue organizing Central Asia Media Conferences and recommend taking further steps to provide a clear mechanism to assess the effectiveness of recommendations passed during conferences to ensure greater impact on media freedom in the region.