



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe**

**The Representative on Freedom of the Media**

**Teresa Ribeiro**

**3 November 2022**

## **Regular Report to the Permanent Council**

*For the period from 19 May to 3 November 2022*

## INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairperson,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to present to you today my regular report to the Permanent Council, covering the period from 19 May 2022 to today.

One year ago, I spoke about the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Maria Ressa and Dmitry Muratov, two outstanding and courageous journalists. I told you that I had mixed feelings about this decoration. It was good news, because with it the Nobel Committee underlined the crucial role of independent journalism in our societies, recognizing its contribution to peace, and because it specifically referred to all those journalists who stand up for freedom of expression, even under the most difficult circumstances.

It was, however, also a bad sign for freedom of the media and freedom of expression: fundamental rights that should be the norm, but apparently are not.

Today, I am sad to say the picture is even grimmer than it was back then. Some months ago, *Novaya Gazeta*, one of the last independent newspapers in the Russian Federation, of which Muratov is the editor-in-chief, was ordered to shut down in the largest and most systematic crackdown on independent media in our region for the past 25 years, all in the context of the war against Ukraine by the Russian Federation. At the same time, Maria Ressa these days faces the immediate threat of imprisonment in the Philippines for her journalistic work, after her appeal against a cyber-libel conviction was rejected.

The picture is bleak, yet clear. Autocratic powers have not stopped their attacks on those they fear most: the people that freely speak their minds, the people that seek the truth, the people that hold those in power to account. The picture is bleak, yet clear. Not even a Nobel Peace Prize can protect from attacks and illegitimate persecution.

It also shows that we cannot afford to relax and slow-down. We need to be relentless and determined; we need to step up our work for enhancing media freedom and the safety of journalists. I will keep doing all I can, but this is a shared responsibility. I cannot singlehandedly make any country have a perfect media freedom record – nobody can.

It was 25 years ago that the participating States of the OSCE established the Mandate I proudly serve, specifically noting their objective to strengthen the implementation of relevant OSCE principles and commitments they have adhered to in the field of free media and freedom of expression as well as to improve the effectiveness of concerted

action based on their common values. Now more than ever the future of media freedom in the OSCE region depends on our sense of shared responsibility.

This report, in line with the bi-annual reporting rhythm I have applied so far, will emphasize the actions that I have taken to further media freedom in our region, meeting the demands of the developments I described in the report of May this year.

After providing a description of the activities of my Office during the past six months, I will use the opportunity to highlight some of the key findings of our Advisory Group of Eminent Experts on Freedom of the Media that has worked with us for the past year, helping to find answers to the very important questions on the current and future role of media, and critically assessing its role for peace and security.

Like always, however, I will start with a brief overview of the media freedom situation across the OSCE region, as I have observed since last May. Although, within the bi-annual cycle of my reports, I will not go into the same detail on trends and developments as I did in May, a report to the Permanent Council would not be complete without this short presentation of some of the issues and developments I have observed in the last half year.

## **BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE MEDIA FREEDOM SITUATION IN THE OSCE REGION**

The war against Ukraine by the Russian Federation continues to be in the focus of all our attention. More than eight months since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the war has taken an immense toll on the civilian population and infrastructure in the country. Thousands of innocent people have been killed; millions have been forced to flee their homes. And the Russian Federation's aggressive attack continues. With ODIHR Director Matteo Mecacci, I issued a statement on 6 October strongly condemning the Russian Federation's decision to illegally annex territory in the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions of Ukraine, pointing to the fact that it further aggravates the already dire human rights situation in these territories and worsens the situation for journalists amidst a war-affected state of media freedom.

As the violence continues, journalists and media workers reporting from the war zones keep working under the most dangerous and difficult conditions, taking high personal risks and facing immense safety threats. With their crucial work, they not only report and inform on developments on the ground, but also contribute to collecting evidence of grave human rights violations and the most serious international crimes that can help to serve justice in the future.

We heard first-hand accounts of this important work by journalists themselves during our side event at the Warsaw Human Dimension Conference end of September. I recall the words of Oleksiy Matsuka, Ukrainian journalist, editor and founder of a local media outlet from the Donbas region saying: "Thousands of Ukrainian people, who currently find themselves under Russian occupation, have been going through an unimaginable suffering on a daily basis. My goal is to reveal these gross human rights violations and war crimes and to demand accountability."

The difficult conditions these brave journalists work under are unimaginable. I want to underline – as I have done previously – that journalists and media workers must never be targets. And yet, they continue to come under fire, with new casualties and deaths reported during the past six months. I mourn the death of French journalist Frédéric Leclerc-Imhoff, who was killed near the city of Severodonetsk in the east of Ukraine end of May, while he was covering an evacuation operation for the French broadcaster BFMTV. Just like other reporters, Leclerc-Imhoff was in Ukraine to inform the world about what is going on in the warzones. He paid with his life for his courageous work. I offer my condolences to his loved ones, his friends and his colleagues.

Reportedly, since 24 February, at least eight journalists were killed in Ukraine while carrying out their professional duties, three Ukrainian journalists and five foreign citizens. Many more media workers were killed because of shelling of civilian areas. On at least eighteen occasions, journalists were kidnapped, among them journalist Zhanna Kyselyova, who was reportedly abducted by Russian forces in the occupied Kherson region in September. I publicly deplored this unacceptable action and called for her immediate release. She was reportedly released after about ten days in captivity.

At the same time and closely connected with the ongoing war against Ukraine, the severe clampdown on media freedom in the Russian Federation continues, with immense severity and intensity. The decision by the regulatory agency Roskomnadzor from 21 September moved the country further down the path of censorship, urging all media outlets to use only information from Russian official sources when reporting on mobilization measures.

Next, the authorities further suppressed *Novaya Gazeta* by stripping its registration and terminating websites license, thereby adding to the already over-restrictive nature of the media environment in the country. In an outrageous step, the authorities sentenced journalist Ivan Safronov to 22 years imprisonment on alleged treason charges beginning of September. He and many other journalists and media workers face continued prosecution, severe restrictions and repercussions for doing their job, like *Novaya Gazeta's* journalist Andrei Zayakhin who was detained on alleged charges of financing extremist activities.

During the reporting period, the authorities also dissolved the Journalists' and Media Workers' Union, further worsening the already dire protection of the rights and freedoms of media workers in the country. In July, the authorities adopted laws that contain retaliatory measures, banning inter alia the activity of foreign media that disseminate their products in the Russian Federation, including online, whenever the activity of a Russian media outlet in another country was banned or restricted.

Overall, it remains the most severe deterioration of media freedom in our region. I issued in total eleven social media posts and six press releases on the aforementioned developments in the Russian Federation during this reporting period.

In neighbouring Belarus, the media freedom situation is unfortunately also on a constant downward spiral. Journalists and media workers continue to face judicial reprisals and lengthy prison sentences for their independent reporting and legitimate journalistic work. The practice of arrests and behind closed-door convictions of journalists, including Katerina Andreyeva, Irina Slaunikova Kseniya Lutskina, Denis Ivashin, Iryna Leushyna, Dzmitry Navazhylau and Andrei Aliaksandrau, on trumped up charges continued also during this reporting period, leading to a further deterioration of the media environment in the country. These cases show a clear pattern of systematic repression of independent journalism in Belarus. I reacted to these deeply troubling developments with eight social media posts and three press releases.

Although the aforementioned country situations warrant separate attention, there are unfortunately other conflicts in our region that have flared up, aggravating and further destabilizing the overall security situation in the OSCE region. These developments make it clear: when peace and security come under threat, media freedom and democracy are threatened as well. And vice versa: when freedom of the media is under attack, so is peace and security. I am closely observing these developments and their potential implications for media freedom.

Also outside of conflict situations, the media are oftentimes targeted. To be a journalist today requires a lot of resilience and commitment, especially as anti-media sentiment and distrust towards the media are rising, and the pressures on media actors are increasing, be it of political, economic, legal or financial nature. The risks, threats and attacks that journalists face these days for doing their job makes journalism a dangerous profession.

The safety of journalists remains therefore one of my top priorities. I was shocked to learn that in early September, investigative journalist Jeff German was killed in Las Vegas for his investigative work. It is important that the police took swift action and identified and detained a suspect. I offer my condolences to his family, friends and colleagues and will

follow the court case closely; perpetrators of such heinous acts must be brought to justice.

Ensuring swift and effective justice for threats and attacks against media workers is a key element in protecting journalists' safety and securing an enabling working environment. Last month, we commemorated the fifth anniversary of the murder of Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia. As an important step in delivering justice, two hitmen were convicted recently to forty years in prison each, with one other person found guilty previously. However, still more needs to be done to bring all masterminds and perpetrators of this horrible crime to justice and send a clear message that impunity will not be tolerated. On 2 November, we mark the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, reminding us all that "knowing the truth is protecting the truth". We cannot afford to be indifferent when journalists are killed, attacked, threatened or harassed.

Safety of journalists does not only include physical aspects. Online attacks and the unlawful deployment of spyware against journalists continue to pose major challenges. I was very concerned to learn that investigative reporter Thanasis Koukakis' phone had been spied on, as emerged in the recent predator spyware surveillance case in Greece.

The spying and wiretapping of journalists endangers the principle that journalists must be able to protect their sources in order to carry out safely their important democratic function. A report published by my Office in July this year highlights the need to increase online safety and digital security for all journalists as a prerequisite for media freedom. The report also illustrates, once again, that women journalists are particularly targeted and harassed in the digital sphere.

I addressed issues regarding the safety of journalists, including online safety and attacks against women journalists, or the protection of journalistic sources, in Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Italy, The Netherlands, North Macedonia, Serbia, the United States of America, and Uzbekistan.

Legal harassment, including criminal prosecution of journalists and arbitrary detentions for their professional activities, are equally worrisome. Abusive legal action against journalists has a direct negative effect on their ability to perform their work. These acts can undermine the economic basis of media workers and media outlets, but always have a strong chilling effect on media pluralism, thereby weakening journalistic freedom in the OSCE region. I addressed these issues in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Greece, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, and Türkiye.

Aside from these forms of legal harassment, I have witnessed a multitude of attempts by governments to place undue and disproportionate restrictions to freedom of expression

and the free flow of information of public interest – often in the name of national security, public order or countering disinformation. This is done through the introduction of new regulations, the use of existing laws or through the abuse of state power and resources.

While I acknowledge the legitimate interest of governments to protect national security and public order and address the challenges connected to disinformation, let me emphasize that any limitation of the right to freedom of expression must be prescribed by law, in pursuit of a legitimate aim, proportionate and necessary.

I raised such issues with a number of OSCE participating States: Albania, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Mongolia, Tajikistan, and Türkiye. I particularly expressed my concern regarding the “Draft Bill on the Amendment of the Press Law and Some Laws” in Türkiye that was passed just two weeks ago, by pointing to the fact that the vague definitions and broad scope of the new legislation can lead to arbitrary and politically motivated actions at the expense of free speech and media pluralism.

In the case of Albania, I welcomed the government’s recent decision to withdraw the controversial draft media laws, known as the “anti-defamation” package, from the parliamentary agenda. I reiterate that all media legislation must guarantee media freedom in line with OSCE commitments and other international standards.

As I have described in my last report to the Permanent Council and in my communiqué of May last year on the free flow of information across frontiers, authorities do not restrict their clamp on media freedom to their national context alone. Such restrictions on cross-border journalism run counter to international standards and OSCE commitments and tend to lead to arbitrary and politically motivated actions. Aside from the aforementioned developments in the Russian Federation, I expressed my regrets about the ban imposed on portals of *Deutsche Welle* and *Voice of America* in Türkiye in July this year.

As I have stated before, any general ban on broadcasting of media outlets should be in line with the requirements of Article 19 and 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and subject to possible judicial oversight by an independent and functioning judiciary.

In line with this, the Grand Chamber of the General Court of the European Court of Justice (EJC) issued in July its ruling in the case brought by RT France against the decision of the European Council to temporarily ban RT’s broadcasting in the European Union (EU). The ECJ rejected RT France’s request for lifting the measures, ruling that the Council’s decision was in accordance with the law to suspend the activity of a media outlet broadcasting propaganda in support of the Russian Federation’s military aggression against Ukraine. In doing so, the Court explicitly referred to Article 20, paragraph 1 of ICCPR that “Any propaganda for war shall be prohibited by law”. The Court referred to ICCPR as one of

the international instruments regarding the protection of human rights that the judges need to take into account for the application of the general principles of Union Law.

## **ACTIVITIES DURING THE REPORTING PERIOD**

These and other developments that negatively impact media freedom in our region warrant adequate approaches. Together with my team, I monitor the media freedom developments in all 57 OSCE participating States and evaluate the most suitable way to react to them.

In addition to monitoring and providing early warning on infringements on media freedom, I am mandated to assist participating States in fulfilling their OSCE commitments regarding media freedom and freedom of expression. This assistance I provide through a number of different activities, initiatives and projects, in very close cooperation with participating States, media representatives, civil society, academia and other key partners. In all my activities, initiatives and interventions, gender mainstreaming is part of an integrated approach to media freedom and freedom of expression.

### **Safety of Journalists**

As a follow up to the Ministerial Council decision 3/18 on the Safety of Journalists, and in view of the growing safety challenges for journalists described above, I launched a new project with the aim to collect good practices and to provide concrete guidance to the OSCE participating States on how to improve the safety of media workers.

A survey was sent out to participating States in May to collect information on existing policies, measures and practices regarding the safety of journalists. We received 36 responses, which will feed into the elaboration of a practical toolkit to be presented to the participating States at the end of next year.

At the kick-off event held on 20 July, current trends and challenges to the safety of journalists were discussed, while highlighting two good practice examples from Serbia and the United Kingdom on efforts to promote journalists' safety. As part of the project, we asked participating States to nominate a National Focal Point who can provide valuable input to our project. I was happy to see that numerous participating States have named such a contact person and I strongly encourage others to follow suit.

In our first thematic roundtable on 21 September, we discussed good practices and existing methods regarding data collection, analysis and reporting on attacks against journalists. Reliable data are essential to understand the magnitude, character and consequences of the problem and in finding suitable solutions. Our next roundtable will



take place on 16 November, focusing on the working conditions of journalists. I look forward to another interactive and productive discussion. Five more roundtables on issues of safety of journalists in conflict situations, intersectional perspectives, digital safety, legal harassment, as well as police prevention and the fight against impunity will follow in 2023.

### **Safety of Female Journalists Online**

Activities and outreach regarding our longstanding project on the Safety of Female Journalists Online (#SOFJO) continued in the second part of 2022. I collaborated with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) to raise awareness among lawmakers on this important issue, including by organizing a screening of the documentary *"A Dark Place"* at the ninth OSCE PA Annual Session in Birmingham. I very much welcome the PA's adoption of two resolutions on this topic: one on combating violence against women journalists and politicians, and another one on ensuring the safety of journalists in conflict zones.

In order to promote implementation of our #SOFJO Resource Guide, I commissioned specific regional research on the online safety situation of women journalists in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, complementing existing research in other regions.

In addition to the report on online safety and digital security for all journalists mentioned above, I published a report on online rape threats against journalists, underlining that such threats constitute acts of gender-based violence and can result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm of women. In addition, my team organized a workshop on gendered disinformation against women journalists at this year's World Congress of the International Press Institute, and a roundtable in Istanbul on the safety of female journalists online in partnership with the International Press Institute.

### **Artificial Intelligence**

Following the publication of the #SAIFE Policy Manual on the impact of artificial intelligence on freedom of expression earlier this year, I have focussed on the implementation of its guidance by organizing various events, expert workshops and discussions in the course of the past six months.

At this year's RightsCon conference in June, my Office organized a workshop where we discussed possibilities to implement the #SAIFE Policy Manual in Central Asia as well as in the conflict-specific context of Ukraine. We further organized stakeholder discussions at the Mozilla Festival on Healthy Internet and at the AI and Human Rights Forum of the Montreal Institute on Genocide and Human Rights Studies.

Given the various crises we find ourselves in, my Office organized a #SAIFE workshop last month, bringing together more than thirty experts from diverse backgrounds to discuss

how to safeguard freedom of expression and media pluralism in the context of automated content governance in times of crises, ranging from armed conflicts, the COVID-19 pandemic to climate change. The workshop identified key recommendations to ensure healthy and vibrant media and information spaces in the digital realm before, during, and post crises.

Next month, we will discuss these recommendations at the Internet Governance Forum in Addis Ababa. I will then present the outcome of these discussions to OSCE participating States in December at a special event linking AI to freedom of expression, media freedom and security. This event will provide an interactive centre stage for AI & free speech dialogue, bringing together state, civil society, academia and media representatives.

Members of my team also participated in a training for National Human Rights Institutions (NHRI) organized by ODIHR in Tirana, providing two sessions on NHRI related implementation of the #SAIFE Policy Manual, and increased co-ordination with media regulators across the OSCE region.

In order to raise broader awareness on the impact of AI on our everyday lives, my Office co-produced the interactive documentary entitled *"Made to Measure"*. The film illustrates very pointedly how a person's life, interests, intimate personality traits, opinions, thoughts and expressions can be identified and predicted – and even manipulated. OSCE participating States were invited to the premiere in Vienna on 27 June.

## **Disinformation**

Disinformation poses serious challenges to our societies in today's fast-growing digital environment. I continued to identify and address these challenges, including by organizing a series of roundtables on disinformation that started back in 2021. We organized the sixth roundtable on 20 June, focusing on the role of public service media in countering disinformation. The experts discussed the remit of public service media, built around values of independence, universality, diversity, excellence, innovation and accountability, implying a responsibility to producing fact-based news content and promoting anti-disinformation narrative.

While disinformation undermines professional journalism and leads to polarization of society and political life, it also spreads fast and cheap. This makes it particularly challenging to counter.

The series of roundtables has shown that addressing the negative impact of disinformation requires international, multidimensional and multi-stakeholder responses that comply with freedom of expression. It also requires the pro-active

engagement of intergovernmental organizations, State authorities, business enterprises, civil society, including the media and academia, and all other stakeholders.

My Office is currently finalizing a working paper that summarizes the findings of the six roundtables and gives an overview of international standards in countering disinformation. This paper will be published in the coming weeks.

In July, I published a report on state-aligned disinformation campaigns and information operations targeting journalists, including gendered elements to discredit women journalists. The report highlights how the design of online platforms and their automated content governance are regularly leveraged to distort the public sphere. Its recommendations will feed into the disinformation working paper.

### **Media Freedom Literacy**

Knowledge of and skills to deal with media and information are one of the most sustainable methods to counter the spread and negative effects of misinformation and disinformation. Media freedom literacy helps people to understand the media's role and functioning in democracy and enables them to critically assess and use information.

Earlier this year, I launched a project to assist participating States with guidance on the development of media literacy strategies, including by sharing best international practices in this field. It aims at identifying current media freedom literacy needs in the OSCE region and at offering recommendations for concrete actions, targeting several stakeholder groups including governments, civil society, academia, and media actors.

The project will also work to create OSCE-wide synergies and pave the way for the development of networks, by displaying successful fact-checking and other relevant initiatives, using a cross-sectoral, human rights-based approach. My Office will organize a Media Freedom Literacy Roundtable on 6 December, offering a multi-stakeholder platform for international exchange and policy learning in the area of media literacy.

### **Conferences and high-level events**

As a follow up to this year's Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Gender Justice, published on World Press Freedom Day together with the freedom of expression mandate holders from the United Nations, the African Commission of Human and People's Rights and the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights, my Office organized a half-day gender event in July. At this meeting, we discussed how gender equality and the right to freedom of expression and media freedom are mutually reinforcing, and closely linked to the advancement of comprehensive security and the strengthening of democratic societies. The event underlined that democracies can only

thrive with a diversity of voices, and with diversity in the media, reflecting our societies' diversity and enabling access to a plurality of opinions and ideas.

More than ever, it is clear that none of us can work in a vacuum; we must involve all of society, connecting the international system with the realities on the ground. Close co-operation and co-ordination with international actors such as the United Nations and the Council of Europe as well as with civil society organizations and academia is key in reaching our common goals and advancing our common agenda.

In this vein, I very much valued the productive exchange with civil society organizations, academia and media during the Warsaw Human Dimension Conference at the end of September. Here, we discussed in different formats the close interlinkages between democracy and media freedom, safety of journalists, and the role of professional journalism in the context of international armed conflicts. Apart from the plenary session on freedom of expression and freedom of the media and a round-table on safety of journalists, my Office and I organized two side events in the framework of the conference.

The first side event, entitled "Establishing truth and enabling accountability: the role of journalists in uncovering human rights abuses and international crimes in times of war", brought together media professionals and civil society representatives reporting on the war in Ukraine, to hear and discuss their reflections and experiences of covering the Russian invasion. It also put into focus the indispensable role of journalists in enabling accountability for perpetrators of violations and crimes under international law.

The second side event focused on encryption as key to preserve confidentiality, integrity, and anonymity online, being a pillar for freedom of expression, the free flow of information and investigative journalism. I will continue to pay particular attention to surveillance and spyware against journalists, and the role of encryption technologies in protecting information flows from interference, surveillance or censorship.

## **Country Visits**

In the course of the past six months, I conducted seven visits to the OSCE participating States. I regard this direct and in-person dialogue with State authorities, journalists and civil society representatives, as well as other relevant stakeholders as a core element of my mandate, allowing me to get a comprehensive picture of the challenges and needs and to discuss ways and possible co-operation on steps needed to improve the media freedom situation in the country.

### ***Romania***

I visited Romania from 7 to 8 June, where my discussions with high-level government officials and other stakeholders focused on access to information; the safety situation of journalists, including in the online sphere; the independence of the public broadcaster; and concerns related to legislative measures by way of emergency ordinances. With journalists and the management of the Romanian public service broadcaster TVR, I had an exchange on the need to design adequate responses to promote editorial independence and to increase the relevance of the public service media.

### ***Serbia***

From 29 June to 1 July 2022, I conducted a visit to the Republic of Serbia. Together with high-level state authorities, I took stock of the progress made in the implementation of the 2020 national Media Strategy and Action Plan, as well as of the persisting gaps and challenges related to it. We particularly discussed how to advance legal, physical and digital safety conditions of journalists; media pluralism and sustainability; editorial independence and functioning of the media regulatory authority and public service media. I stressed the need for a whole-of-society approach in addressing these issues and offered my continued assistance. The visit also provided an excellent opportunity to launch the Serbian translation of the SAIFE Policy Manual at a joint event with the OSCE Mission to Serbia.

### ***Portugal***

From 5 to 8 July 2022, I conducted an official visit to Portugal, where I met with high-level State officials, the Ombudsperson for Human Rights, the Chairperson of the regulatory authority for the media, the Director of the public service broadcaster as well as various media representatives. Establishing a clear link between media freedom, public debate and democracy, I discussed Portugal's achievements and challenges regarding media freedom over the past years, urging the authorities to decriminalize defamation.

### ***North Macedonia***

In my visit to North Macedonia from 12 to 14 September. I addressed with high-level state officials and other interlocutors the safety conditions of journalists; the need for timely adoption of pending legislative amendments to media laws and the criminal code; access to public information; the editorial independence and financial sustainability of the public service broadcaster and the media regulatory authority. Among the main concerns raised by media representatives were working conditions of journalists; diminishing trust in media; online harassment and abuse; and a steady increase in lawsuits aimed to silence and discourage critical reporting. I look forward to continuing the excellent co-operation with North Macedonia during its 2023 OSCE Chairmanship-in-Office.

## ***Tajikistan***

While visiting Tajikistan between 3 and 7 October, I discussed with government representatives various media freedom issues in the country, such as physical and legal safety of journalists; media regulation; accreditation of media workers; access to information; countering violent extremism and terrorism; as well as the removal of restrictions on media freedom which are not in compliance with OSCE commitments. It is regrettable that I was not able to meet with high-level representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs while I was in Dushanbe. One of the cases I raised with my interlocutors was that of journalist Abdullo Ghurbatti, who was sentenced to seven and a half years in a high security colony, while I was in the country, adding to a high number of journalists behind bars. Shortly after that, Daler Imomali, another journalist, was convicted to ten years in prison. I reiterate my call for their release and my request to get access to imprisoned journalists. I continue to stand ready to provide any assistance to Tajikistan in strengthening media freedom in the country.

## ***Mongolia***

During my visit to Mongolia from 10 to 13 October, I discussed with high-level State officials possibilities to strengthen the legal framework for media in the country; the safety of journalists; self-regulation of media as well as media sustainability and its importance for free and independent journalism. I also underlined the media's central role in further developing a concept of financial viability with a strong and well-trained journalistic corps as well as an efficient media self-regulatory system. I expressed my readiness to continue the excellent co-operation with Mongolia.

I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the respective delegations for the excellent co-operation in organizing the country visits.

## **THE ROAD AHEAD**

Mr. Chairperson,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today is a special day, marking an important milestone. The mandate of the RFoM, as an autonomous institution of the OSCE, was established, almost to the day, 25 years ago, on 5 November 1997 by the Permanent Council, following the Lisbon Summit of Heads of State in December 1996. With this, they recognized the unique and crucial role of media freedom for peace and as an integral part of the comprehensive security approach.

In marking the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I want first to pay tribute to my predecessors who have fulfilled this mandate with great dedication, commitment and passion for our common goal. I am proud to continue on their path.

I also look back at 25 years of close and constructive co-operation with the OSCE participating States, with OSCE executive structures and field operations, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, international and regional organizations dealing with media freedom, as well as with civil society, media and academia. These are all important partners of the RFoM Institution, partners with whom we have built strong ties in our common goal of promoting and protecting media freedom across the OSCE region.

In all these years, the RFoM has proven to be comprehensive and flexible enough to address emerging issues.

The media landscape, however, has changed drastically over the past years and decades. The persistent threats to media freedom have compounded, gaining new complexity as a result of political, social, technological and economic transformations.

To reflect and assess these developments in a comprehensive manner, I have established an Advisory Group of Eminent Experts on Freedom of the Media (AGEEFOM). The Group held several working meetings over the past year to identify and discuss the most pertinent trends and focus areas, and to elaborate on the potential role for the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media in researching and addressing them.

The overall intention of this initiative is to promote media freedom and its key contribution to peace and security across the OSCE region.

The Advisory Group of Eminent Experts discussed current political trends and the way they impact media freedom; how social, economic, and environmental developments affect media freedom; and how digital transformations shape the media landscape. To this end, they focused their discussions on three questions, which became the framework of our report:

- (1.) Is media freedom relevant for human security today and tomorrow?
- (2.) What is the current understanding of the “media” element of the “freedom of the media” concept?
- (3.) How can media freedom be safeguarded by intergovernmental organizations, particularly the OSCE?

The outcomes of their discussions were presented to the OSCE participating States and the wider media community at our event on 2 November, where we marked the anniversary and presented the summary report entitled “Can there be security without

media freedom?" I want to express my sincere thanks to the experts for embarking on this important exercise with me and my team.

With this outcome report as a guiding tool, it is time now to look forward and start to take action on the proposed recommendations. These recommendations are not a pick and choose menu; only by taking them all together can we strengthen freedom of the media, human rights, democracy, and security in the years to come. This requires joint efforts and collaboration of many stakeholders.

The coming years will be most challenging for those upholding the cause of freedom of the media. We will need vigilance, collaborative thinking and collective action.

It is our shared responsibility to ensure media freedom. I will do my part and continue to focus on areas where we can make progress; where we can work together to achieve better conditions for journalistic work; to create an environment where media pluralism can thrive; and to support initiatives that will enhance the safety of journalists and media freedom overall.

My focus will be on continued dialogue with OSCE participating States here in Vienna and through direct contacts with government authorities, journalists, civil society and academia. I recognize the need to further strengthen and broaden the network of the Institution and engage in a structured dialogue process with multiple stakeholders.

I will also continue to provide participating States with specific guidance, recommendations and assistance in the implementation of OSCE commitments on freedom of the media through our extra-budgetary projects, legal advice and reviews.

I count on your support and collaboration in order to achieve further progress.

## **CONCLUSION**

Mr. Chairperson,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I have pointed out at the beginning of this report, the media freedom situation is dire. Since the beginning of this year, I have made a total of 362 interventions in 53 OSCE participating States. This number of interventions, public and confidential, shows that violations of OSCE commitments regarding media freedom continue to be a grim reality across our region.



However, there were also some hopeful signs.

I am positive about the fact that the issue of legal harassment (also known as Strategic Litigation against Public Participation, or SLAPP) has gained considerable attention, with ongoing discussions at national and international level on new measures to counter the negative impact that such abuse of the legal system can have on media workers and other public watchdogs.

It is encouraging to see new policies and regulatory frameworks being developed – be it in the European Union with the Digital Services Act or the AI Act, or in the United States of America with a recent Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights. Based on a human-rights centred approach, these initiatives aim at addressing challenges related to platform governance. I am hopeful that these and similar initiatives will contribute to safeguarding free speech in the digital age, by focusing on processes, not content, and by increasing accountability, transparency and public oversight of online platforms. I will continue to provide guidance, contextualize recommendations and assist in their implementation over the course of the next year, and we stand ready for further cooperation to ensure our rights are guaranteed online and offline.

Another encouraging example I would like to mention here is the recent decision by the government of Germany to launch a new programme for the support and protection of journalists and media workers in conflict areas and in exile, in partnership with various civil society organization. The so-called “*Hannah-Arendt-Initiative*” is an important signal for freedom of expression, freedom of the media and safety of journalists, in particular in times of crises. It is a topic that I have been advocating for in my bilateral meetings with State authorities throughout the past six months.

Such illustrations demonstrate that progress is possible – if there is political will. Democracy and media freedom are too precious to be allowed to wither away. We cannot afford to look away, to not act and to not stand up. It is our shared responsibility to turn our political commitments into reality in order to preserve our common security, our democracies and a free information space. I will continue to dedicate all my efforts to this endeavour and invite you to do the same.

In closing, I want to seize the opportunity to thank my team for their hard work and dedication to the cause of media freedom.

I also want to express my sincere gratitude to those OSCE participating States that have supported the activities of my Office through their generous extra-budgetary contributions or through the secondment of qualified staff. These resources are essential, especially in view of the budgetary restraints that the organization is facing. I want to thank in particular the delegations of Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Finland,

Germany, Italy, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States of America for their support.

## ANNEX

20 <sup>th</sup> week 19/05 – 22/05	Outgoing letters: 2	Free flow of information Legal developments Safety of journalists
21 <sup>st</sup> week 23/05 – 29/05	Outgoing letters: 3 Incoming letters: 4	Arrest/Detention of media workers Legal developments
22 <sup>nd</sup> week 30/05 – 05/06	Bilateral meetings: 2 Outgoing letter: 1 Social media: 2	Legal developments Killing of media workers Safety of journalists
23 <sup>rd</sup> week 06/06 – 12/06	<b>Country visit:</b> Romania <b>Event of the week:</b> – Spotlight on AI and Freedom of Expression (SAIFE): What’s next with policy makers? <hr/> Press Release: 1 Social media: 2	Arrest/Detention of media workers
24 <sup>th</sup> week 13/06 – 19/06	<b>Event of the week:</b> – Disinformation and the Safety of Journalists – The Nexus between Subversion of Democratic Processes and Threats against the Free Press <hr/> Bilateral meetings: 4 Outgoing letter: 1 Incoming letter: 1 Social media: 3	Arrest/Detention of media workers Free flow of information Safety of journalists
25 <sup>th</sup> week 20/06 – 26/06	<b>Events of the week:</b> – Expert round table on Disinformation and Public Service Media – Future of Information – Calling for fact-based and independent information <hr/> Bilateral meetings: 2 Outgoing letter: 1 Incoming letter: 1 Social media: 2	Arrest/Detention of media workers Legal developments
26 <sup>th</sup> week 27/06 – 03/07	<b>Country visit:</b> Serbia <b>Events of the week:</b> – Premiere of <i>Made to Measure</i> – OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Annual Session – Launch event of #SAIFE Policy Manual in Serbian <hr/> Outgoing letters: 9 Incoming letters: 4	Free flow of information Legal developments Safety of journalists

27 <sup>th</sup> week 04/07 – 10/07	<b>Country visit: Portugal</b> Bilateral meetings: 2 Outgoing letter: 1 Incoming letter: 1 Press Release: 1 Social media: 2	Free flow of information Legal developments Safety of journalists
28 <sup>th</sup> week 11/07 – 17/07	<b>Event of the week:</b> – Gender Justice: Advancing Pluralism and Free Speech For All Bilateral meetings: 2 Outgoing letters: 10 Incoming letter: 1 Press Releases: 3 Social media: 3	Arrest/Detention of media workers Free flow of information Legal developments Safety of journalists
29 <sup>th</sup> week 18/07 – 24/07	<b>Event of the week:</b> – Launch Event Safety of Journalists Project Bilateral meetings: 2 Outgoing letter: 1 Social media: 7	Legal developments Safety of journalists
30 <sup>th</sup> week 25/07 – 31/07	Outgoing letter: 1 Incoming letter: 1 Social media: 1	Legal developments Safety of journalists
31 <sup>st</sup> week 01/08 – 07/08	Outgoing letters: 2 Incoming letters: 2 Social media: 1	Arrest/Detention of media workers Free flow of information Legal developments Safety of journalists
32 <sup>nd</sup> week 08/08 – 14/08	Outgoing letter: 1 Incoming letters: 2	Arrest/Detention of media workers Free flow of information Safety of journalists
33 <sup>rd</sup> week 15/08 – 21/08	Outgoing letter: 1 Press Release: 1	Legal developments Safety of journalists
34 <sup>th</sup> week 22/08 – 28/08	Outgoing letter: 1 Social media: 1	Safety of journalists
35 <sup>th</sup> week 29/08 – 04/09	Bilateral meetings: 4 Social media: 3	Safety of journalists

36 <sup>th</sup> week 5/09 – 11/09	<p><b>Event of the week:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Putting human rights at the heart of Europe’s future, Human Rights Leaders and Experts Meeting in Vienna</li> </ul> <hr/> <p>Bilateral meetings: 3 Press Releases: 2 Social media: 2</p>	<p>Arrest/Detention of media workers Free flow of information Killing of media workers</p>
37 <sup>th</sup> week 12/09 – 18/09	<p><b>Country visit:</b> North Macedonia</p> <hr/> <p>Outgoing letters: 2 Incoming letter: 1 Press Release: 1 Social media: 3</p>	<p>Arrest/Detention of media workers Free flow of information Legal developments Safety of journalists</p>
38 <sup>th</sup> week 19/09 – 25/09	<p><b>Events of the week:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– First Roundtable on the Safety of Journalists: Data collection, analysis and reporting on attacks and violence against journalists and promotion of journalistic work</li> <li>– OSCE Asian Partners for Co-operation Group Meeting: Countering Disinformation – OSCE and Indo-Pacific Perspectives</li> </ul> <hr/> <p>Bilateral meeting: 1 Outgoing letters: 2 Incoming letter: 1 Press Releases: 3 Social media: 5</p>	<p>Free flow of information Legal developments Safety of journalists</p>
39 <sup>th</sup> week 26/09 – 02/10	<p><b>Event of the week:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Warsaw Human Dimension Conference</li> </ul> <hr/> <p>Bilateral meeting: 1 Outgoing letters: 8 Incoming letters: 2 Press release: 1 Social media: 4</p>	<p>Arrest/Detention of media workers Legal developments Safety of journalists</p>
40 <sup>th</sup> week 03/10 – 09/10	<p><b>Country visit:</b> Tajikistan</p> <hr/> <p>Bilateral Meeting: 1 Press Releases: 3 Social media: 2</p>	<p>Arrest/Detention of media workers Legal developments</p>
41 <sup>st</sup> week 10/10 – 16/10	<p><b>Country visit:</b> Mongolia</p> <hr/> <p>Outgoing letters: 3 Press Releases: 3 Social media: 7</p>	<p>Legal developments Killing of media workers Safety of journalists</p>

<p>42<sup>nd</sup> week 17/10 – 23/10</p>	<p><b>Event of the week:</b> – Seventh expert roundtable on disinformation</p> <hr/> <p>Bilateral meeting: 1 Outgoing letters: 2 Social media: 5</p>	<p>Legal developments</p>
<p>43<sup>rd</sup> week 24/10 – 30/10</p>	<p>Bilateral meeting: 1 Incoming letter: 1 Social media: 4</p>	<p>Legal developments Safety of journalists</p>
<p>44<sup>th</sup> week 31/10 – 03/11</p>	<p><b>Events of the week:</b> - High-level meeting marking the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the RFoM - Report to the Permanent Council</p> <hr/> <p>Bilateral meetings: 3 Social media: 4</p>	<p>Free flow of information Legal developments Safety of journalists</p>