

# 23<sup>rd</sup> OSCE Central Asia Media Conference

## Promoting public value of the media in Central Asia

### *Closing remarks*

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear colleagues,

Before we come to the end of this year's Central Asia Media Conference, let me reiterate my thanks to you for your active participation and for taking time from your busy schedules to support this event. I appreciate your readiness to pitch in the discussion and thus contributing to the success of the conference. I am especially pleased that media workers, media rights advocates and representatives of the legislative and executive branches, all followed the proceedings and expressed their views. I am glad that many of our guests are here, who have supported the work of my Office for many years. Inasmuch, it is good to see new faces and get to know new names among the participants.

This regional conference has proven its continued relevance and value as a platform to get a distinct insight into the current situation of freedom of the media in the region. It was particularly rewarding to see the openness in which problems were being raised and discussed.

The first session on Thursday addressed a much-discussed concept of Public Service Media, debated for many years in this region and in other parts of the OSCE area. The notion itself struggles with the pressure to meet the comprehensive international standards and reflect cultural and political realities on the ground. This balancing act can only be achieved if the society agrees on a fair, comprehensive and robust understanding of 'public value', provided by such service and of course, its accountability to the public.

I would like to also pick up what our experts said and underline that the creation of genuine public service media can only be a long term investment including sustainable funding options and needs to be accompanied by an inclusive legislative process in order to ensure the necessary framework conditions.

The second session today gave us an overview of progress made and persisting challenges regarding the status of journalists, their physical, legal and economic safety after one and half years of the pandemic.

Many restrictions have been placed on the media and public alike due to sanitary requirements, including restriction of movement, thus hampering access to information. In this regard, I would like to stress that media should be considered essential services in the situation of national emergency and their role in keeping citizens safe must be acknowledged. Let me also link this problem back to the first session on the public value of media. Lack of investment in reliable public service media has proven to be a boomerang in many countries in times of the ongoing global health crisis.

Media companies understandably have been operating under great economic strain, freelance media workers have been hit especially hard and I welcome initiatives which relieved this strain.

However, legal uncertainty and punitive measures, which sometimes restricted sources of information, sometimes discouraged critical accounts of the situation by threats of administrative penalties have taken their toll on quality and diversity of media output.

Keeping us safe, by fighting terrorism and violent extremism, rightly is a top priority for any government. At the same time we must make sure that this safety does not come at the expense of our fundamental freedoms like the freedom of expression which are the foundations of freedom and democracy. More safety does not require less freedom. In fact, one is impossible without another. Countering extremism and terrorism clearly goes beyond speech. It requires a whole of society approach, including a dialogue between state agencies and civil society, media and private enterprises as well as long term investments in building resilient societies.

I am also fully cognisant that states are being confronted with ever new and emerging challenges, including dis- or misinformation or fake news, with a whole new sense of urgency because of their pervasiveness due to social media and the global range of these challenges. But let me remind us all that any restrictions to the right to seek, receive or impart information and ideas of any kind must conform with the tripartite test, which means that they must conform to the strict tests of legality, necessity and proportionality.

And finally, safety of journalists unfortunately remains a high priority which needs to be addressed by the authorities. Let me underline that this does not only include physical violence but also the need to protect them from legal or judicial harassment. Obstruction of journalists' work, assaults and threats have all been mentioned as regular problems.

Not to be forgotten is the side event, which preceded the second session today. With this event, we want to address the ways and means how States can and should improve the online safety of women journalists. The event started with a short presentation of our recently launched **SOFJO Resource Guide** and continued as a moderated discussion with two rounds of questions to each of three speakers.

You will receive a summary of the sessions from us on a later date. We will also be sharing an evaluation form with all registered participants. Your detailed feedback and comments would be more than appreciated. They will help us to review and where necessary adapt our approach in order to keep this format relevant and useful for you.

I would like to praise our interpreters for their hard work, and thank all my staff in the Office and all colleagues and the many helping hands that made this conference possible.

Finally, I also would like to thank colleagues from the OSCE Offices and Centres in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan as well as the Ministries of Foreign Affairs in the region for their tireless efforts in making this conference a success.

I very much wish to underline that this conference is not supposed to be a “one off” event, but is rather part and parcel of a long-term partnership with both authorities as well as media and civil society with the aim to further media freedom in the region. We will continue to offer assistance to ongoing reform processes and will gladly look into any requests to provide legal reviews or other expert assistance. Let me express my appreciation to the Uzbek authorities who have just requested a legal opinion on the draft mass media law, which we are about to finalize. I would like to take this

opportunity to encourage all states to make use of the assistance that we can provide in order to jointly advance media freedom.

Please let's keep in touch and I hope to be able to see you all in person at the latest next year.

Thank you very much for being with us. Stay safe and healthy!