



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe**  
**The Representative on Freedom of the Media**  
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'Media and war'  
speech to the Standing Committee of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly  
13 January 2000

Madame President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

During the meeting we had at the Istanbul Summit, the President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, Helle Degn, had asked my Office to present to you today some thoughts and findings of my Office on the dramatic situation of the media when OSCE member-states are involved in military activities.

She asked us to make some comments on the Kosovo crisis and on the ongoing war in Chechnya.

First of all, I would like to make some general remarks on democracies going to war. A democracy has to overcome the age-old saying that truth is the first victim of war. Regarding media freedom and access for journalists, all OSCE member states have committed themselves to providing a fair and free environment for journalists. Democracies at war are in an entirely different situation than authoritarian dictatorships. Soviet citizens who were critical of their country's invasion of Czechoslovakia or Afghanistan often ended in prison or in a psychiatric ward. The first democrat who during a terrible war pointed out this difference very clearly was Winston Churchill in his speeches to the British parliament in the early forties.

Throughout the last century the citizens of the leading western democracies were confronted with this entirely different situation as compared to war reporting in non-democracies. A critical journalist, or any citizen critical of the policies of his government, in any democracy can not be labelled as a "traitor." However, even in a democracy a journalist can become the target of a government attack as has happened to John Simpson from the BBC during the NATO campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. British Prime Minister Tony Blair told the House of Commons that Simpson's reports "were compiled under the instruction and guidance of the Serbian authorities." NATO spokesman Jamie Shea once referred to the campaign against FRY as the first "media war" and to journalists as "soldiers in this war." This is a position that I can not accept.

There is a history to democracies going to war. The British democracy already had to deal with this challenge during the Boer war at the turn of last century. The French democracy experienced this during the Algerian war, the United States had to face this same challenge of public scrutiny and criticism during the Vietnam war.

I am making these general historical remarks because these mentioned countries today are members of the OSCE. The function of my Office, among others, is not to judge whatever military decisions are made but to concentrate on potential repercussions to media freedom.

To continue on the subject of FRY, already in the early nineties foreign correspondents had difficulty working in that country, especially when there was a discussion during the Bosnian war that NATO might attack Belgrade. I would like to stress, that adequate working conditions for foreign journalists were one of the central points of the third basket of the Helsinki Final Act.

We do have ample proof that most government-controlled media in FRY, especially RTS, were used as propaganda machines by the regime. This became even clearer after the adoption of the Serbian Law on Public Information in October 1998.

NATO's situation was entirely different. Brussels had to deal with journalists, who could do their own research and decide themselves on how to inform the public. Most of what the NATO spokespersons admitted and what they denied was a direct consequence of democracies going to war. NATO's mistakes were public relations mistakes of spokespersons who themselves were not adequately informed. Sometimes, these mistakes, as we have learned recently, were very serious ones. The spokespersons in reality often knew less than they could admit and even less than some journalists. Some of these issues are still being debated publicly. Only recently, NATO admitted to speeding up a tape that showed one of its planes mistakenly attacking a train. This admittance is proof that NATO, as an organisation of democracies, has to be open and has to admit its mistakes.

Since all NATO members at the same time also belong to the OSCE, I had to intervene on one occasion -- after the missile attack against RTS in Belgrade last April. I publicly voiced my concerns and sent a letter to Xavier Solana, NATO Secretary-General at that time. I never received a reply.

After my public statement, there were some critical comments made, but I take it that the decision to bomb a television station, housing journalists, by the leading democracies of the OSCE is an issue which concerns my Office. There is no doubt, and I stressed that in April, that not only during wartime this station and its journalists were used as a propaganda instrument by the Milosevic regime. But to destroy a media building and to kill and aim at media workers under the pretext that they are part of the war-machine could have, among other things, resulted in considerable repercussions for foreign journalists working in Belgrade. They could have been considered as belligerents and treated accordingly. On 23 April 1999, sixteen media workers from RTS lost their lives.

Democracies, even at war, must always accept and follow their basic international commitments. They are and they will remain the example others use, or misuse, when they go to war.

The corrective function of the NGO's on this matter is paramount: The International Press Institute published an important report "The Kosovo News and Propaganda War," with texts written by journalists and experts from over two dozen countries. Its main theme is expressed by Peter Goff from IPI in the book's introduction: "The war was punctuated with accusations, both from the media and against the media. Claims of censorship, propaganda purveying, distorted and suppressed information were met by allegations of media treason, sensationalist reporting, cheerleading and appeasing."

This year Austria is heading our organisation. That is why I would like to refer to some thoughts by Gerfried Sperl, Editor-in-Chief of Der Standard, in the IPI book. Sperl wrote about discussions and even confrontations between journalists in Austria regarding the NATO action against FRY. The key word here is "discussion," something that can only happen in a democracy.

A few words on the recent fighting in Chechnya. My Office has tried to follow the media aspects of this military operation as closely as one is able to from Vienna. I was aware of the difficulties facing local and foreign journalists trying to cover this conflict, of the generally unanimous position of support of the action taken by the Russian government by the most influential media in the country. Initially, there was a danger that the media might become part of a campaign against non-Russian minorities in Russia. As far as we know, this did not happen. However, there is still a danger of anti-Russian propaganda materialising in the Caucasus as a result of this war. Some of these issues I have raised with the Russian government.

Related to the challenges of war is protection of journalists in conflict areas.

After the murder of two journalists in Kosovo in June 1999, I suggested that one way to provide journalists with additional protection could be by clearly identifying them as media professionals. In September my Office, together with Freedom Forum, an American

non-governmental organisation, held a round table on this issue. I plan to continue this discussion in 2000 and I urge OSCE Participating States to play a more active role in ensuring the safety and security of journalists in conflict areas. I also would like to invite senior military officers to this debate. The importance of this issue could not be underestimated especially since last year we had more armed conflicts in the OSCE region than in 1998.

In December I intervened with the Russian authorities on behalf of a group of journalists working from Grozny who were unable to leave the city. In the end they made it out safely. Not all media professionals have been so lucky. Since the start of military activities in Chechnya, three journalists died as a result of the fighting. Their names were added to an already long list of reporters killed in 1999. This list is much longer than in 1998 and it is also up to us to ensure that in the year 2000 no more journalists will pay with their life for the right to do their job. I urge you to assist us in this noble endeavour.

One of the major issues that concerns parliamentarians directly is increased media repression in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, specifically in Serbia. On 21 October 1998, in line with my early warning function, I stressed publicly that the adoption on 20 October of the already mentioned Serbian Law on Public Information basically institutionalised a state of war against independent media. On 23 October, I raised this law with the Yugoslav Foreign Minister Zivadin Jovanovic, and four days later I met with journalists from Serbia to hear their views. Since then I have been regularly appealing to the Belgrade regime to repeal this law. On 25 June 1999, I wrote to all OSCE Foreign Ministers asking them to use their influence to bring about a repeal of the law. In 1999, as predicted, we saw our worst fears materialise in Serbia. The law has been used on numerous occasions to silence independent media, to prosecute those who have tried to inform the public on the state of affairs in their country. Recently I read Milošević's interview to *Politika* given this New Year's eve. Milošević believes that the law has not been used "sufficiently enough." He also said that there was complete freedom of the media in Serbia while in Western countries the media is controlled by the state. Overall, Milošević's interview will once again have a chilling effect on media in Serbia, and not only on those who consider themselves in opposition to the current regime.

I would like to use this opportunity to appeal to your parliaments to use their influence to try to persuade Belgrade to repeal this draconian law. If Yugoslavia ever plans to become truly a part of Europe, this law should be abolished. I am also concerned for the fate of Flora Brovina, a Kosovo Albanian doctor and writer, sentenced recently in Serbia to 12 years in prison. Her case is yet another indication of the state of repression in FRY.

Thank you.