



CLOSING REMARKS
8th South East Europe Media Conference
12 October 2021

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The past two days provided an important opportunity to take stock of the current state of affairs of media freedom and freedom of expression in the region. Even though we have heard about some positive examples, I am afraid the situation in these countries is no exception to the global trend of deteriorating journalistic conditions. It is an important reminder to us all, a reminder of the need to continue dialogue and co-operation across national borders and fields of expertise. And a reminder that state authorities should ensure the safety of journalists. As discussed, this cannot not be limited to physical safety alone, but has to include economic, technological and online safety, and very importantly, it has to include full respect for the rule of law. Without this holistic concept of safety, journalism cannot properly fulfil its democratic function in society.

Let me use this opportunity to recap some of the key issues that were discussed during the different panel sessions:

The first panel of our conference highlighted the various facets of the disinformation issue and the complexities in countering it. It is clear that there is no silver bullet against this difficult phenomenon in today's fast-paced digital world, which means that we need to use all the available tools at our disposal.

We have heard about several positive initiatives in the region. Among the main proposals, I would like to recall the need for a strengthened application of existing self-regulatory mechanisms to preserve journalism standards, and therefore ensure professional quality reporting across all communication channels – particularly in the online sphere.

Alongside self-regulation, fact-checking by journalists coupled with media and internet literacy also play an important factor in challenging disinformation threats, and as such, should be promoted at all levels of society. Here the right to freedom of information, and more specifically the right to access information held by public authorities, is one of the most important mechanisms in helping journalists gather the facts and data necessary to fulfil their professional function. Any restriction on the right to freedom of expression must conform to the three-part test of legality, necessity and proportionality.

The second session provided us with an overview of the regional trends and current challenges related to the safety and working conditions of journalists in the context of the present health crisis. We heard how a fraying public trust and growing anti-media sentiment, exacerbated by disinformation, have taken an immense toll on the safety and working conditions of journalists – especially of those covering sensitive issues and public gatherings.

Journalists should not face the risk of intimidation, assaults and threats – simply for exercising their right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas, through any media, and regardless of frontiers. It is clear that we need to further ascertain journalism as a public good. To support that notion, concerted efforts by law enforcement and judicial authorities is of utmost importance in the protection of journalists both offline and online.

As we heard from the grim testimonies of journalists from the region, safety of journalists continues to be a major concern. I would like to thank them for their readiness and openness to share their personal experiences.

We addressed the ways and means States can and should use to improve the online safety of journalists. I hope this will serve as a departing point for tangible progress. During our third session we emphasized the prevailing gender specific risks and inequality that women journalists

face within the media sector in South East Europe, challenges that unfortunately can be witnessed by women journalists across the OSCE region. Although the varying levels in intensity, they all face similar detrimental effects of this trend – not only on their ability to provide a public service, but also to promote diversity and plurality in the media.

While there is still a lot to be done, not all is grim. I praise the commitment of the female journalists here today who have mobilized and started initiatives to raise awareness and promote gender-responsive representation and news coverage. Such positive examples can serve as an inspiration to empower women towards positive change across the region and beyond.

In the fourth panel, today, we heard several cases depicting the growing legal harassment of journalists and media outlets, also referred to as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs). Unfortunately, this has become an ever more common practice across the OSCE region. What is particularly worrying in this regional context, however, is that the media are already operating under immense economic strain, with limited financial and legal support to defend themselves in court.

Discussions clearly conveyed that such lawsuits not only threaten media's very existence and stifle critical voices, but also impact individual journalists' psychological well-being. We heard some

positive recommendations taking place at the EU level to address SLAPPs. I can also reveal to you that in the coming weeks I will launch a short report addressing this issue, all of which, I hope, will serve as a good starting point for inspiring legislative changes at the national level.

Ending on a positive note, the young journalists brought us fresh insights on media freedom and its future in the region. We should all be grateful to those who have embarked in a profession so vital for our democratic societies. Their perspectives and proposals for the betterment of journalism shared with us today are very much appreciated. We take note of their valuable recommendations. As Iris Luarasi just said: “The future of journalism is in good hands.”

In the next few weeks, you will receive a detailed summary of the outcomes of the sessions covered during our two-day’s conference. We will also be sharing an evaluation form with all registered participants. Your detailed feedback and comments would be highly appreciated. They will help us to review, and where necessary, adapt our approach in order to keep this format relevant and useful for us all.

Let me express my warm thanks to you for your lively participation and for devoting your time to this event. I appreciate your readiness to engage in the discussions with our pool of expert panellists and

moderators. This event would not have been possible without all of your involvement.

I would like to commend our interpreters for their excellent work, and thank my colleagues in the Office for their enduring efforts in turning this event into a smoothly running conference from start to end.

Lastly, I would like to convey special thanks to Ambassador Vincenzo Del Monaco, Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania and his team for their tireless and valuable support in co-organizing this year's conference, as well as the many helping hands from the OSCE field operations in the South East Europe region, which ensured that we all benefit from a plethora of expert knowledge from across this region.

In conclusion, let me underline that this conference is not intended to be a "one off" event. Rather, it is part of a long-term dialogue and partnership with both authorities as well as media and civil society in the region, with the aim to further media freedom in South East Europe and beyond – an aim to which I am wholeheartedly committed.

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 strengthen the implementation of relevant OSCE principles and commitments for functioning of free, independent and pluralistic media in the region. My Office will continue to offer assistance to ongoing reform processes

and will gladly look into any requests to provide expert advice including legal reviews.

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.