



EUROPEAN UNION

**OSCE Permanent Council N° 1203
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**EU Statement in Response to the Report by the OSCE
Representative on Freedom of the Media, Mr Harlem Désir**

The European Union warmly welcomes the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Mr Harlem Désir, to the Permanent Council and thanks him for his comprehensive report. The many challenges to freedom of expression and media freedom in the OSCE area need to be taken with utmost seriousness by all OSCE participating States. There is a clear link between democratic, peaceful and prosperous societies that contribute to our joint security, and free expression and independent media. The autonomous work of the RFOM, in particular the early-warning and rapid response function, is of vital importance to the OSCE's comprehensive concept of security.

The EU remains steadfast in its support to the mandate of the RFOM, which is flexible enough to address emerging issues both online and offline. We reiterate our unequivocal support for the Representative's professional, unbiased and dedicated approach in exercising his mandate. In these times, participating States are in dire need of his frank advice and assistance. We also fully support the thematic work of the Office of the RFOM. RFOM's contribution to topics such as tackling disinformation and promoting freedom of expression in digital contexts are particularly important. The EU applauds the priority given to the issue of female journalists' online safety and looks forward to the screening of the documentary "A Dark Place", produced by the Office together with the International Press Institute.

As all other participating States, EU Members have vowed to cooperate fully with the RFOM. We acknowledge that RFOM highlights issues also

in the EU, demonstrating that freedom of expression and media freedom can never be taken for granted. In advancing the situation for media within the EU, Member States seek to engage fully with the Office of the RFOM, and deeply appreciate these exchanges.

Looking outside the EU, we share many of the concerns raised by the RFOM in his report. We follow closely and with concern the legal processes in Turkey against journalists, other media actors and media outlets and agree with RFOM about the critical state of press freedom in the country. Far too many journalists in Turkey remain behind bars, many of them accused of spreading terrorist propaganda based on their reporting about issues of public interest. In Russia, independent journalism is under increasing pressure, as shown recently by the exceptionally high fines imposed on the online outlet The New Times. We share RFOM's concerns about the media freedom implications of this decision, which followed an interview by the magazine's chief editor with opposition politician Aleksey Navalny. In this regard, the recent judgement of the European Court of Human Rights referring to violations of Mr Navalny's rights should be noted, including the assessment that arrests had actually been aimed at suppressing political pluralism. We also echo RFOM's repeated call to release investigative journalist Igor Rudnikov. The EU first raised this case in reply to Mr Désir's first regular report and we can only regret that the journalist remains in detention one year later, despite concerns that the accusations are linked to his journalistic work.

With regard to Ukraine, we have echoed the RFOM's call to bring perpetrators to justice for the odious murder of anticorruption activist and journalist Kateryna Handzyuk and are preoccupied by the worrying and unprecedented increase in attacks against civil society activists and investigative journalists observed since 2017. The EU encourages Ukraine to continue to work with the RFOM to address concerns and challenges. We remain deeply concerned with the dire situation for freedom of expression in Crimea and Sevastopol, illegally annexed by Russia, as well as in areas held by Russia-backed armed formations in eastern Ukraine. We once again echo the RFOM's calls on Russia to

release Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov and Ukrainian journalist Roman Suschenko, noting that over 70 Ukrainian political prisoners are illegally detained in Crimea and Russia.

The EU welcomes the 20th Central Asia Media Conference organized by the RFOM as well as the engagement by participants. We agree with him that too often in the region, journalists work under pressure and fear. In different cases, we have seen charges brought against journalists for economic crimes, fraud or extortion. The EU is also concerned that threats and violence against journalists and other media actors in the Western Balkans remain a serious issue, and call on our partners in the region to heed the advice of RFOM.

The RFOM has repeatedly stated that the safety of journalists is his first priority, which we support. He regularly highlights issues of threats, abuse, harassment and violence against journalists and other media actors, including gender-based attacks, as well as cases of imprisonment of journalists because of their work and other aspects of legal safety. This is a pressing concern in the OSCE area. The EU therefore fully supports the initiative by the Italian Chairmanship-in-Office to adopt a Decision on the Safety of Journalists in Milan. A heavy responsibility rests on all of us as participating States to make use of this opportunity to update and strengthen OSCE commitments in this regard.

In conclusion, the EU once again thanks the RFOM for relentlessly standing up for freedom of expression and media freedom, online and offline, and for reminding that human rights and security are mutually reinforcing as part of OSCE's comprehensive security concept. Our thanks go also to his able team for their tireless work. We wish you all success in the months to come.

The Candidate Countries the FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO* and ALBANIA*, the Country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and Potential Candidate BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA, and the EFTA countries ICELAND and LIECHTENSTEIN, members of the European Economic Area, align themselves with this statement.

* The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.