

REMARKS BY H.E. AUDRONIUS AŽUBALIS,
MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
at the
CONFERENCE ON SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS,
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It is my honor and pleasure to welcome to this Vilnius Conference Secretary General Marc Perrin de Brichambaut, OSCE Parliamentary President Efthymiou, and the many journalists, government officials and non-governmental representatives from around the world. I am pleased to see so many from our participating States, and I extend a particularly warm greeting to colleagues from our partner states, Egypt and Afghanistan.

I am also pleased to share this podium this morning with Dunja Mijatovic, the OSCE's Representative of the Freedom of the Media.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On October 12, 1993 the Lithuanian investigative journalist, Vitas Lingys, working for an influential Lithuanian daily newspaper, was murdered by members of organized crime as he drove from his home to work.

While this was the only case of this sort in Lithuania, it is not the only case in the OSCE or in the world when journalists have been murdered for seeking to bring the light of truth to criminal or undemocratic activities in their home societies.

Journalists are killed or disappear in the OSCE region virtually every year. Dozens suffer from attacks aimed at preventing them from reporting information vital to the functioning of democracy and preservation of freedom:

Anna Politkovskaya, Georgiy Gongadze, Scorates Giolias, Paul Khlebnikov, Georgi Stoev, Elmar Huseynov, Yury Shchekochikhin. Names all too well known to us. Cameraman Dmitry Zavadsky has been missing for more than a decade and journalist Vasyl Klymentyev disappeared in 2010.

The perpetrators of these killings and disappearances remain largely unknown, unprosecuted, unpunished. For too long.

It does not have to be that way.

In the case of Vitas Lingys the Lithuanian police and judicial authorities, responding in an atmosphere of widespread popular civic distress over the murder, moved quickly, found the four perpetrators and brought them to justice, within a year.

This quick action did not bring Vitas back, but it triggered a series of legislative and other actions which established a generally protective climate of support for journalists which prevails to this day.

Widespread and active civic support for the operation of a free and secure media is the greatest safety journalists can be offered.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Excellencies, media colleagues

The true quality of a nation's democracy can be measured by the security and safety of its journalists.

When journalists can act without fear, secure in their person and in their profession, they are empowered to bring vital information to the people. They become agents of democracy and freedom. They serve as a watchdog over the institutions of society. They can convey accurately and objectively the actions and attitudes of the power brokers of society. In this way they are as vital as any other actor or institution in the democratic form of governance.

Without the free flow of knowledge and information, the people, on which our democracies are founded, will be rendered deaf, mute, and in the end, powerless. They become subject to control and victimization by any one of several groups or individuals. These include economic forces, ideological groupings, a single political party or leader, or the machinery of the state.

Allow me to touch on a number of points to help set the stage for our planned discussions. We are not here just to talk, but we should be aiming at conclusions and practical steps which can be implemented to improve the safety of journalists, and with that the safety and freedom of our societies.

We, the participating States, have a duty and a commitment to ensure the safety and security of our journalists. Our commitments go back from the Commemorative Declaration at Astana, through the Paris Charter to the Helsinki Final Act.

What best practices can we identify which, like the actions in Lithuania in 1993-94, contribute to the creation of conditions and attitudes conducive to open inquiry, transparency and respect for the legitimacy of journalist inquiry and reporting?

What laws or practices have you found improved the working conditions of journalists by guaranteeing freer access to information, protection of confidential sources or the decriminalization of libel?

Physical violence directed at journalists is, simply stated, a gross and fundamental violation of that individual's human rights. It is totally unacceptable. Violence against journalists rightfully draws our attention and our anger. It warrants the same concern and condemnation, the same rapid judicial action, to find and bring the perpetrators to justice as it would in the case of an attack on a government Minister, a peaceful demonstrator, a dedicated judge or a courageous policeman.

A writer, broadcaster or blogger is equally threatened by other forms of harassment, threats to their persons, political or business pressures, blacklisting, or harm to their families

What steps do you see should be taken to provide for free and unhindered performance of journalistic investigation and reporting, without the threat of harm or death, without stifling bureaucratic and legal controls?

I wish to call attention to the Resolution on the Freedom of Expression on the Internet adopted by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly just under two years ago here in Vilnius. This

important resolution begins to explore the rapidly evolving realm of electronic and social media, which belongs as much on our agenda as more traditional forms of media and journalism.

Through the past half year, supported by the active involvement of ODIHR and the Representative of the Freedom of the Media, I have encouraged programs throughout the OSCE area, focusing on journalists' safety and freedom. This Conference is a halfway mark, which will, I trust, contribute to valuable conclusions and actions at the Ministerial here in Vilnius, six months from now.

Traveling through the South Caucasus, Central Asia and other parts of the OSCE area, I have repeatedly stressed in conversation with government officials the importance of decriminalizing libel and opening up government processes with laws which allow journalists legitimate, free access to routine government actions and documents. There is progress. Experience has shown me that constant encouragement will bring us forward. I will continue to work on this principle

Ladies and Gentlemen, Excellencies,

Society and the state have a responsibility to the journalist and also to themselves, to protect the journalist from the illegal and improper use of state power to hinder the journalist in the legitimate pursuit of his profession on behalf of the society. For that reason the judicial system should be developed to allow consideration of the public interest and not just state interest, in all court cases involving journalists.

At the same time the journalist shares a sacred responsibility toward society not to abuse his or her rights of expression in a manner that threatens the fundamental rights and security of that society. Participating States can protect both by developing clear and balanced guidelines and laws governing the media in an open and transparent manner.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Excellencies,

This conference is more than a conference of the Safety of Journalists. This conference is ultimately about the safety, security and freedom of our societies and the contribution which free and secure journalists can make to that goal. What could be more important?