



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media Teresa Ribeiro**

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Communiqué by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

A call to protect media freedom during armed conflict and to stop propaganda for war

I condemn strongly the full-scale military attack that the Russian Federation has launched against Ukraine and I deeply deplore the immense human suffering it has inflicted on the Ukrainian people. Unfortunately, these developments are leading to a further decline in the safety of journalists and a deterioration of media freedom in the region. At the same time, we know that it is the free, independent, and professional media that can defend the values of peaceful co-existence and mutual understanding, thus positively contributing to early warning; conflict prevention; crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation. In this communiqué, I will stress some fundamental principles and OSCE commitments that are applicable in situations such as the current one.

Safety of Journalists

The participating States involved in a conflict should adopt all feasible measures to protect media workers engaged in dangerous professional missions and co-operate to that effect, which was also reflected in the 2018 OSCE Ministerial Decision on the Safety of Journalists. First and foremost, journalists should never be targets. In accordance with United Nations (UN) Security Council resolutions and OSCE commitments journalists, media professionals and associated personnel working in areas of armed conflict shall be considered civilians and shall be protected as such. Further measures should include the protection of media organizations and media infrastructure from military attacks. Measures must also include the tracing of missing journalists; ascertaining their fate; providing appropriate assistance; and facilitating their return to their families.

Disinformation and censorship

Exploitation of the media for harmful disinformation in the context of an armed conflict by the OSCE participating States and the use of media restrictions and harassment to deprive citizens of access to free media and information is in clear violation of our commitments, as the ones reflected in the OSCE Istanbul 1999 Document. This is particularly harmful when a state sponsors propaganda for war that carries elements of national hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.

As I have stated many times before, the answer to counter disinformation can never be found in a blanket ban; a complete shutdown of the internet; or fully blocking media outlets from their possibility to disseminate information. Nor is it found in a governmental demand that all journalists use only information from official sources and official language when reporting on a military action. The latter amounts to censorship.

Establishing a link between propaganda for war and suppression of free speech, the UN General Assembly pointed out in its Resolution 381 (V) that propaganda's success is generally possible when the media are deprived of their freedom to report on relevant events and dissenting opinions.

Propaganda for war

Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) carries an important exception to the right to freedom of expression, as it explicitly forbids propaganda for war. The Preamble to the ICCPR indicates that such propaganda would be an assault to the "inherent dignity" and "equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family" as the "foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world".

Discussing propaganda for war, the UN General Assembly identified an intent or a threat of hostilities as the criteria for the illegal act, when stating in its Resolution 110 (II) that it "[c]ondemns all forms of propaganda, in whatsoever country conducted, which is either designed or likely to provoke or encourage any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression".

The UN Human Rights Committee further stated in its General Comment No.11 of 29 July 1983 that war propaganda "extends to all forms of propaganda threatening or resulting in an act of aggression or breach of the peace contrary to the Charter of the United Nations." A number of UN General Assembly resolutions addressing the issue of dangerous propaganda affirmed the condemnation of "propaganda against peace". One of them, the UN General Assembly Resolution 381 (V), stated that propaganda for war includes not just incitement to conflicts or acts of aggression, but also "measures tending to isolate the peoples from any contact with the outside world, by preventing the Press, radio and other media of communication from reporting on international events, and thus hindering mutual comprehension and understanding between peoples." Lastly, it formulated as the third intrinsic element of propaganda for war the taking of measures "to prevent their peoples from knowing the views of other States Members".

None of the abovementioned, however, affects the right for a sovereign state like Ukraine to advocate, including through the media, for the sovereign right of self-defence, as spelled out in the United Nations Charter.

Conclusion

Guaranteeing the safety of journalists, also in times of armed attacks and conflicts, is a principled commitment of all OSCE participating States. I therefore call upon all participating States to safeguard all media workers in our region.

Exploitation of the media for harmful disinformation in the context of an armed conflict; a blanket ban of media access; a complete shutdown of internet; a full blockade of media

outlets from their possibility to disseminate information; and *de facto* censorship – these all go against the well-established principles of freedom of the media and relevant commitments in our region. Therefore, I call on all OSCE participating States to refrain from such practices.

The heinous nature of propaganda for war requests a particular strong call from my side on all OSCE participating States to refrain from such practice.

Teresa Ribeiro
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