



PERMANENT DELEGATION OF NORWAY
TO THE OSCE

STATEMENT IN RESPONSE TO THE
REPRESENTATIVE ON FREEDOM OF THE MEDIA

Delivered by Ambassador Steffen Kongstad to the Permanent Council
Vienna, 2 July 2020

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Mr. Chair,

I join others in welcoming the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM), Mr Harlem Désir, to the Permanent Council and thank him for his report.

The freedom of expression and the freedom of the media are cornerstones of democracy. They are also crucial for the realization of other human rights. Attacks on journalists or other media actors, as well as infringement upon their independent work, are attacks on these freedoms. Such attacks threaten democracy itself.

In that sense, the report of the RFoM shows that government responses to the Covid-19 pandemic also have threatened democracy itself. As the RFoM, we share the concern of the authorities to combat the dissemination of disinformation and misinformation related to the current health crisis. Still, we underline that access to reliable information is an important part of the freedom of expression. We are also concerned about the potential undue restrictions on the freedom of expression that these measures may cause.

The Covid-19 pandemic, it seems, has exacerbated the routine efforts of some participating states to hinder free media through the abuse of executive as well as

legislative power, this time ostensibly grounded in the interest of public health. The RFoM has had to address this issue too many times over the last months. We share his concern about the developments, and join his calls for withdrawing measures that infringe on the freedom of the media.

All participating states must bear in mind that any restriction on the enjoyment of human rights as a result of emergency measures must be strictly in line with international law, which means that they must be prescribed by law, necessary, non-discriminatory, time-bound and proportionate to the evaluated risk.

In our reply to the RFoM's report in November, we raised a number of concerns about the freedom of the media in the OSCE region. This included

- online state censorship and restrictions on a free and open internet,
- the often flaccid government responses to serious, sometimes deadly, attacks on journalists,
- the continuing impunity for crimes against journalists and media workers, and
- the obstruction of the freedom of the media through misuse of legislation, among other things, to counter terrorism, or blasphemy and defamation.

Every single one of these concerns has been sustained, even strengthened, through the course of the pandemic. The situation calls for increased vigilance and increased efforts for securing the freedom of the media in every participating State.

The interventions of the RFoM are of crucial importance to keeping the international community informed of developments in the situation for the media in the OSCE region, perhaps more so than ever in the early and chaotic stages of Covid-19 responses. Moreover, the interventions assist states in keeping each other accountable for their implementation of media freedom commitments. In this regard, the independence of the RFoM, as guaranteed by his mandate, is essential to effective monitoring and interventions.

Aided and informed by the RFoM's interventions, monitoring, legal reviews, and co-operation with the participating States, Norway will continue to promote the freedom of the media and the safety of journalists. We will continue to safeguard the independence of the media, combat censorship, promote public access to information, and ensure a safe and enabling environment for free and pluralistic media. We strongly support Mr. Harlem Désir in his work as Representative on Freedom of the Media, and thank him and his team for their tireless efforts.

Thank you