



Opening Remarks of  
**The Honorable Isabel Santos**  
*Human Dimension Seminar on Media Freedom*  
13 May 2013 || Warsaw

Ambassadors, colleagues, and friends of freedom,

Thank you for being here and thank you to the Ukrainian chairmanship and the Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media and the ODIHR for organizing this seminar.

As vice-chair of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's human rights committee, I can think of no greater indicator about the freedom of people than the freedom of their press.

If our citizens are not free to know, free to speak up, freely informed about the actions of their government, then few other freedoms can ever really matter. Think about it. If you are free to hold a demonstration or organize a political party, but you don't have a culture of media freedom that critically covers the government or fairly reports about your activities, then your organizing efforts are futile.

If you are free to vote in a so-called democratic election, but your media environment does not allow you to objectively learn about the political affairs in your country, your voting decisions will be forever misinformed or uninformed.

You see, media freedom is the background for so many of the other commitments our countries have agreed to. It truly is the canvas, without which we can never paint the life we wish to lead.

I come from Portugal. Only 39 years ago we were in the final grips of Europe's longest dictatorship. Criticism was not tolerated. Political opponents were locked away. Today, the press is free, ideas are openly debated, and our political system is stronger for it. Yes, all the participating states are on their own path when it comes to freedom, and back home we too need to make reforms to let go of some holdover laws that aren't often used – but could be – to curtail the freedom of the press.

I am speaking of the criminalization of libel. I applaud the Representative of Freedom of the Media for her tireless advocacy on this topic. It is a success and a testament to the good co-operation within the OSCE that at least 8 countries since 2009 have decriminalized defamation and left issues of insult to civil – not criminal courts. There is still a way to go, and I look forward to this country, and my own, taking steps to amend these laws to help strengthen press freedom.

But I am not here today to talk. I came to listen, to hear your recommendations, to ensure the voice of civil society is loud within the OSCE and echoed in the halls of all our parliaments.

So, please debate thoughtfully this week and speak with action in mind, because the strength of the OSCE and our shared commitments depends on it.

As we look to the agenda before us, I want to remind you that in so much of what you do, you have a strong ally in the Parliamentary Assembly.

On access to information, we have been fierce advocates for greater openness from the OSCE and our own governments. This year, the Assembly lent support to the civil-society-drafted Declaration on Parliamentary Openness, a set of principles to which parliaments and governments should adhere to usher in a culture of transparency and strengthen civic engagement.

I know in Dublin, the OSCE fell short of consensus to protect fundamental freedoms in the digital age, and I hope this year will be different. With your help it will be.

Because it is not enough for us to talk about protecting journalists or lament the pressure reporters face in oppressive regimes. We need our governments to take a clear stand that says the freedoms enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act, the agreements made going on 40 years now must be upheld whether we are using a transistor radio or an iphone. The platform was never the issue when debating media freedom – it was always the practice. It's time all participating States confirm that view.

This is the way, this is our way, a way of democracy, transparency, and freedom.

Now for me, it is time to stay quiet and I look forward to hearing more from you in the coming days. Thank you.