

## Welcoming remarks for 7th Annual South East Europe Media Conference

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by wishing you all a very good morning. Normally, a conference like this would be opened by the Representative on Freedom of the Media. But in this case, where we are temporarily without one, I, as the Director of the Office, have the honour to welcome you to our seventh South East Europe Media Conference jointly hosted with the OSCE Mission to Serbia, in collaboration with OSCE field operations from this region.

Today, we should have all been meeting in Belgrade where this year's media conference was planned to take place. However, due to the present circumstances, the health risks and uncertainties, we are gathering in a different format. In order to be able to continue our important work even under these challenging circumstances we have decided to move our meeting online.

I am very pleased that we are joined today by a multitude of stakeholders from across the South East Europe region and beyond. Over 200 participants have already joined us online, including journalists, media associations as well as representatives from key public institutions involving law enforcement and the judiciary, regional and international experts, and civil society. More participants are also following our discussions on the livestream now running on the OSCE RFoM event page.

Let me take this opportunity to express particular thanks to our panellists and moderators for their readiness to share their expertise and steer our discussions. Since our last regional conference held in Sarajevo a year ago, our Office has observed a persisting trend in threats to media freedom and the work of journalists across the region. Safety of journalists and media workers remains a growing and most challenging concern, particularly for female journalists who face additional threats of sexual violence, intimidation and gender discrimination, including in the online sphere.

The safety of journalists and the fight against impunity for attacks against journalists are paramount to safeguarding freedom of expression and ensuring a safe and enabling media environment. This is a commitment that all 57 OSCE participating States jointly pledged to uphold in the landmark OSCE Ministerial Council decision on Safety of Journalists adopted in 2018. This decision specifically urges participating States to "Take effective measures to end impunity for crimes committed against journalists, by ensuring accountability as a key

element in preventing future attacks, including by ensuring that law enforcement agencies carry out swift, effective and impartial investigations into acts of violence and threats against journalists, in order to bring all those responsible to justice, and ensure that victims have access to appropriate remedies”.

Alongside these challenges to journalists’ safety, this year has been marked in particular by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has not only amplified existing trends in the deterioration of media freedom, but also added new layers of challenges to freedom of expression, freedom of the media and access to information. This year’s conference aims to examine the impact of COVID-19 on media freedom, with a special focus on the safety of journalists as an imperative for a free, diverse and independent media. Law enforcement agencies and the judiciary play a crucial role in protecting and ensuring a safe and conducive media environment, both online and offline, and in combating impunity for crimes against journalists and other media professionals.

That is why we have chosen these topics for this year’s conference and why we have invited you, the representatives from the police and the public prosecution offices, to engage in our discussions. By working together through a multi-stakeholder approach, we can enhance the safety of journalists. Your presence and the exchange of your experience and knowledge will contribute to a more sustainable and comprehensive solution to the challenges that independent investigative journalists and other media actors face in their important work.

We will delve into these topics in four sessions in the coming two days. Our first panel, starting straight after our opening remarks, will look into the existing national mechanisms for co-ordinated responses to threats and violence against journalists, specifically those developed in Serbia and the Netherlands. In the case of Serbia, a Permanent Working Group for Safety of Journalists was established in 2017, comprised of representatives from the police, public prosecutor’s office, and seven media and journalist associations. As part of this initiative, a Contact Point System was created as a novel mechanism to facilitate reporting of, and access to information on, cases involving attacks against journalists. In a similar spirit, the Dutch law enforcement authorities and the media community established a working group in 2018 to jointly strengthen the position of journalists against violence and aggression. These examples can serve as reference models to replicate in other countries in the region. Discussions will thus focus on the opportunities and challenges in establishing national mechanisms to reinforce and ensure the safety of journalists.

The second panel will discuss in particular the commitment in the Ministerial Council Decision on Safety of Journalists to “establish...national data collection, analysis and reporting on attacks and violence against journalists.” Establishing robust, harmonized and gender-responsive mechanisms for data collection and reporting on violations of journalists’ safety is essential to ensure that prevention, protection and prosecution efforts are well informed and appropriately targeted. In this light, the second panel will provide an opportunity to exchange current regional practices and good examples in the area of data management on safety of journalists, and explore ways in which existing data collection initiatives could be harmonized and unified through a common set of criteria and standards.

Our third panel, taking place tomorrow morning, will examine in detail the impact of COVID-19 related measures on media freedom and freedom of expression in the South East Europe region through the lens of regional and international experts. The present global pandemic is unprecedented and has posed fundamental challenges to democracy, with

measures introduced that are impacting various fundamental human rights, including freedom of expression, freedom of the media and access to information. Over the past months, with the imposition of COVID-19 related restrictions and lockdowns, the media witnessed both a heightened public demand for information and an ever more impeded access to reliable data retained by public authorities. Together with the mandate holders on freedom of expression of the United Nations and the Organization of American States, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media issued a joint statement on 19 March, calling on governments to promote and protect access to and the free flow of information during the pandemic. In particular, the statement recalls that: “Human health depends not only on readily accessible health care. It also depends on access to accurate information about the nature of the threats and the means to protect oneself, one’s family, and one’s community”. And, by the same token: “The right of access to information means that governments must be making exceptional efforts to protect the work of journalists. Journalism serves a crucial function at a moment of public health emergency, particularly when it aims to inform the public of critical information and monitors government actions.” Furthermore, the health crisis has had an adverse economic impact on the media sector, with a significant decline in newspaper circulation and advertising revenues. These developments have by all means exacerbated the level of media pluralism and access to sources of information at a time when the public most needed accurate, relevant and reliable information. In this view, the third panel will provide an opportunity to take stock of lessons learned by all stakeholders in creating a conducive media environment.

Tomorrow, in our fourth and final session, we will address the growing safety concerns that women journalists face online when doing their work, and the efforts by participating States to respond to online attacks against women journalists. The digital era has created new opportunities for journalists, but it has also provided a platform for new forms of attacks, particularly against women, not only for being a journalist, but also because of their gender. In the OSCE Ministerial Council Decision on Safety of Journalists, States recognized the distinct risks faced by female journalists in relation to their work, such as sexual harassment, abuse, intimidation, threats and violence, including through digital technologies. The prevalence of gender-specific threats leads to a higher incidence of self-censorship among women journalists, while threats often go unreported and/or unpunished. This has a detrimental impact not only on their individual safety and access to justice, but also on their journalistic work and the free flow of information. A silenced journalist mutes the voices of the people who need them the most, and curbs society’s right to a plurality of voices and information to make informed decisions. Tomorrow, we will hear chilling testimonies from female journalists from the region. These stories and experiences are a reminder of the specific situation and added burdens that women journalists face in today’s digital age. They are also a sign that ever-stronger efforts are needed to tackle these prevailing issues. In this regard, I am pleased to announce that our Office has developed a comprehensive resource guide on safety of female journalist online, a preview of which we have already shared with you, including three chapters that are relevant to tomorrow’s discussions. The Resource Guide proposes points of action for different actors that can contribute to an enabling environment for the media. It is authored by Silvia Chocarro, who will be joining us for this session tomorrow, in co-operation with Sarah Clarke, Paulina Gutierrez and Judy Taing, and I would like to thank them for authoring this document. The Resource Guide, which is due to be published in full this fall, aims to provide a concrete way forward for different stakeholders in reinforcing the safety of women journalists online by applying gender-responsive and holistic approaches. This last panel will be dedicated to exploring concrete actions on how to move from policy to practice through a multi-stakeholder approach, and

will reflect on the national responses adopted so far as well as the recommendations presented in the forthcoming Resource Guide. I hope that our discussions will prove to be a valuable contribution to improving the safety situation of journalists and freedom of the media in the region, in order to shape a more conducive media environment that is in line with the OSCE commitments on freedom of expression and free media.

I would like to thank all the respective State authorities from this region for supporting this conference as well as the OSCE participating States, the Netherlands and Bulgaria, for their generosity and interest in funding this conference. Lastly, I would like to thank my team and the colleagues at the OSCE Mission to Serbia who have put all of this together. Thank you for joining us and I wish us all a very productive and fruitful conference.