

**Opening Statement  
of the Chairperson-in-Office  
H.E. Federal Minister for Europe, Integration, Foreign Affairs  
Sebastian Kurz**

**Freedom of the Media in the Western Balkans  
Vienna, 27 February 2017**

Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to welcome all of you to today's Conference on Media Freedom in the Western Balkans.

I would like to especially welcome my colleague and friend

- Foreign Minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Igor Zrnadak
- and our keynote speaker Mr Andreas Ernst,
- as well as all panellists who will be taking part in today's discussions.

Thank you for joining us.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you know, Austria has taken over the OSCE Chairmanship at a critical moment. Everywhere we look, there are grave threats to peace and security:

- war and destruction in places like eastern Ukraine and Syria;
- serious violations of international law and signs of increasing nationalism;
- and radicalisation and terrorism within our societies.

Given these challenges, we focus on three priorities during our Chairmanship:

First, we want to contribute to defusing existing conflicts.

Second, we will create a platform to assist States in their efforts to combat radicalization and violent extremism.

Third, we will do what we can to help rebuild trust and confidence between the participating states of the OSCE.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Building trust requires open and constructive dialogue.

Free Media is essential to creating the right conditions for such a dialogue. Thanks to courageous journalists, all of us here are informed on issues that affect our lives.

Journalists also shed light on incidents of violence, torture, discrimination, corruption, abuse of power and much more. And this is an essential first step to accountability. Because of that, media is often called the fourth pillar of democracy.

I think we all agree that an independent, professional, and pluralistic media is indeed a core element for a healthy democracy.

And: Freedom of the media is also crucial for the protection of human rights and can contribute significantly to political stability.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Some countries of the Western Balkans have emerged from years of violent conflict. However, the wounds afflicted to their societies have not yet fully healed.

The OSCE has active field operations in the Western Balkans. They assist host countries in fostering local capacities through concrete projects, also in the field of promoting free media.

In my opinion this is an important contribution to strengthening the cohesiveness and resilience of societies to better counter threats to security.

The intention of today's conference is not to focus only on those areas where further progress is needed. We should rather look at positive examples and best practices in the region.

- Where can we identify promising activities to counter existing challenges?
- What can we learn from each other?
- Which models are being applied and can be transferred, not only within the region, but also across the OSCE area?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The OSCE has the world's only intergovernmental media watchdog: the institution of the Representative on Freedom of the Media.

I am therefore very glad to be co-hosting this conference together with the OSCE Media Freedom Representative, Dunja Mijatović.

I would like to use this opportunity to thank and congratulate Dunja for her important work over the last years!

As you know, Austria very much supports the European perspective of the countries of the Western Balkans.

Today's conference is an opportunity to look at examples on how to tackle safety of journalists and media ethics, and to share those with the entire OSCE region.

Thank you for your attention.