OSCE

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

**Seventh Central Asian Media Conference
Almaty**

Pluralism in the Media and the Internet

On 13-14 October 2005, the annual Central Asian Media Conference was held in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The Conference was organized under the auspices of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, **Miklos Haraszti**, and the OSCE Centre in Almaty.

For the seventh time, 150 participants from all five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – gathered to discuss developments in the region in the media field. The participants included journalists and representatives of non-governmental media organizations, as well as officials, experts and foreign guests. As in previous years, the conference provided a unique opportunity for interaction, an exchange of views among the participants and a creation of new bonds between regional colleagues.

At the first session, participants focused on the developments in the region which have had an impact on freedom of the media. Last year's conference topics, **Libel** and **Freedom of Information**, were reviewed by international and local experts. The situation in the region has not substantially improved since that time. It is crucial that necessary reforms in libel and freedom of information, as recommended in the Dushanbe Declaration of 2004, be started.

The two main topics this year were **Pluralism in the Media** and **the Internet.**

While issues of pluralism and the Internet were specifically discussed, their interconnectivity has also become very clear in the course of the discussion.

Specifically in Central Asia, the Internet has in the last couple of years become in some countries the last resort of pluralism and an alternative source of pluralistic information compared to television and print press. In all Central Asian countries it is becoming the future of pluralistic media. International organizations like the OSCE should engage more than ever in protecting freedom of the Internet.

The Representative on Freedom of the Media has in the last years developed a whole set of publications, recommendations and "recipes" for best practices and good governance of the Internet which hopefully will serve as guidelines for all OSCE participating States.

Almaty Declaration on Pluralism in the Media and the Internet

The debates at the Almaty Conference on Media stressed the following conclusions:
- Governments should ease state secret and other laws that unnecessarily restrict access to information. States should adopt and implement comprehensive freedom of information laws which maximize media and public access to government-held information.
- Further efforts should be made at decriminalization of offences concerning libel and defamation. The concepts of distinguishing between criticism of private and public

figures should be introduced throughout punitive legislation in order to allow for vivid debate on public-interest issues.

- The fines imposed by the Courts on media enterprises should not drive them into bankruptcy.

Internet:

- Regulation of the Internet should be limited to instances where it is absolutely unavoidable.
- Internet media should enjoy the same protection by press freedom provisions as classical media.
- All acts on regulations of the Internet should be taken after necessary consultations with the Internet community.
- There should be no state regulation or registering of websites or Internet domains besides purely technical matters.
- Websites should not be obliged to be physically hosted in the country even if targeting home audiences.
- Bodies administering the country's domain name system (DNS) should be independent from the state.
- The development of the technical infrastructure of the Internet should be fostered.
- In order to improve both public and media access to information and facilitate electronic government, public bodies should publish helpful information about their structures and activities on web sites.

Pluralism in the Media:

- Providing conditions for pluralism is a state obligation; caring about the content with which the actual outlets and channels fill the information space is not a state task.
- Strategies need to be devised to help development of pluralism in all media fields from television through print media to Internet.
- Efforts should be taken to develop professional skills of journalists including training programs utilising local experts.
- Built-in, internal pluralism should be provided in state broadcasting even before official transformation into a government/independent public broadcasting institution. This means, in the first place, ensured access to state TV for all candidates running for national office during election campaigns.
- External pluralism should be promoted by both law and practice of non-political licensing for privately-owned television and radio stations.
- Starting a newspaper should become a notification process where it is still a registration process.
- Governments should acknowledge denationalization of printed media as one of their main tasks.
- Privatization of state assets within a reasonable period of time should become a legal obligation for their today's publishers.
- Initial tax exemptions should be provided for newspapers to help them survive the transition from state to private property.
- In the meanwhile, independent bodies should supervise equal access to financial resources, printing possibilities, distribution networks, advertisement revenues, etc. for both state-owned and privately-owned print press.
- Foreign or mixed ownership of all communication outlets should be allowed under anti-monopoly rules.

Almaty, 14 October 2005