



The Representative on
Freedom of the Media

OPENING SPEECH

6th South East Europe Media Conference, Sarajevo

18 June 2019

Thank you dear Amela Odabašić
Dear Ambassador Bruce Berton,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to welcome you all here today to the 6th South East Europe Media Conference.

I am particularly pleased to be here in Sarajevo, where my Office organized its very first media conference in the region in 2011. Since then, this event has become one of the largest annual forums in the region for discussing media freedom and freedom of expression.

We have this year's conference in a city where many media have worked under extreme conditions during the 4-year siege, to inform the people and the world and to promote the idea of peace and of another future for Bosnia and Herzegovina. The newspaper *Oslobodjenje* continued to be published, the Radio and Television of Bosnia and Herzegovina continued to broadcast and provide a home for numerous foreign journalists. When I came into the city yesterday I saw that the building still bears scars from the war. I am happy that we are joined today by the Director and Editor in Chief of the newspaper *Oslobodjenje*.

I would like to thank the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ambassador Bruce Berton for their support in organizing this conference in Sarajevo this year.

Since our last regional conference held in Struga one year ago, a lot of events happened in the region and we have unfortunately witnessed the continuation of threats of all kinds and of many attacks against media outlets and media workers. Journalists are still harassed, intimidated, threatened, discredited, beaten and attacked. It is regrettably hard to say that the general media climate has seen significant improvement.

At the same time, we have seen everywhere in the region that the media have been at the center of public discussion during major social and political developments. This is a clear sign that many people understand the key role of media for any democratic developments. There is a demand and a support for having free and independent media, including Public service media, and to get rid of the control of a few on the means of information of the majority. But this is also the reason why they are under pressure from those who want to control the public discourse.

What is at stake is the possibility for the population to receive information from a plurality of sources, the quality of information, the possibility to counter manipulation and false information, to combat corruption, to hold the powerful to account. That's why we think independent, pluralistic media and ethical journalism are so important. What is at stake in the discussions and in the intervention of many actors around the media is the future of democracy itself.

This is why we have chosen the topics that will be addressed at this year's conference. I hope that our discussion will lead to concrete recommendations and outputs from all of us here, in order to improve the situation.

Our first panel will give us a broad overview of the latest media freedom developments in the region. Discussions will focus on the main economic obstacles and current challenges as well as good practices and examples on media sustainability. Successful business models are tremendously important, especially at a time when the media is confronted with the impact of digital transformation.

Economic viability is one of the key pillars of quality and diverse media. This presupposes an economic but also political and legal environment favourable to the development of various and independent media projects.

Unfortunately, there are a number of examples where the media are used as tools to advance certain political or economic interests, or are put under political or financial pressure, at the detriment of quality journalism and the citizen's right to be informed. In this context, state aid and state subsidies are extremely sensitive. Transparent rules and procedures adequately supporting independent and quality media are pertinent, in order to avoid politically controlled advertising and subsidies that create unfair market competition and leads to the disappearance of different voices. This is also detrimental to public trust in the media.

It is often argued that markets in the Western Balkans are too small for thousands of different existing media. I truly hope that this conference will help us to better understand the evolution of the media landscape, and will enable us to develop concrete recommendations on how to resist such pressure, in order to develop a system that will support diverse and innovative media in South East Europe.

The second panel will address one of the longstanding priorities of my Office, that of safety of journalists. The safety situation facing journalists unfortunately remains dire in the region. I would like to recall in particular the horrific shooting of Olivera Lakić in May 2018 in Montenegro, and Vladimir Kovačević who was beaten in Bosnia and Herzegovina in August 2018. In Serbia, Milan Jovanović's house was burnt down in December 2018 and in North Macedonia journalists from TV21 were threatened and harassed in April 2019.

These are just some of the most prominent cases, but let us also not forget the dozens of media professionals who receive different types of threats – almost on a daily basis. No country in the region has been immune from attacks.

I want to underline that safety of journalists is important for all OSCE participating States and last December, at the OSCE Ministerial Council in Milan, the 57

participating States adopted a landmark Decision on Safety of Journalists, the first of its kind. The decision covers different aspects of safety of journalists and recognizes that all are crucial to media freedom. Now, we need to move to the implementation phase and address “how” we can better protect journalists, to send a message that their safety is a responsibility of the state that must be fully ensured and safeguarded. Commitments on paper now have to be translated into action.

In this decision, the States recognised that female journalists are particularly at risk, being singled out and fiercely attacked – not only for being a journalist, but also for being a woman, and we have heard many testimonies particularly from this region. We will therefore also be screening later today our documentary, “A Dark Place”, which looks at the specific online harassment and its impact on the work of female journalists. It has been very well received at a number of film festivals and is one of the finalists for the European Cinematography award.

Before the film, during the panel on safety, you will hear testimonies from some of the journalists of the region, who have suffered attacks and abuse simply for carrying out their work. I hope that these stories will push us forward, in calling for better protection, for an end to impunity and for government action to ensure journalists can work in a safe environment.

At the same time, however, there are some positive stories that give us hope, such as the first instance court ruling in the case of the killing 20 years ago of prominent Serbian journalist Slavko Curuvija. While this case is at the appeals process, I call on states to urgently solve all cases of murdered journalists, as this remains a very big problem in the region. There can be no impunity for crimes committed against journalists, no matter how much time has passed.

The panel will also focus on these positive examples and discuss the establishment of working groups to assist authorities. In the Ministerial Decision on Safety of Journalists the OSCE participating States also committed themselves on establishing national databases on attacks against journalists. It would be important if we can come up with some concrete proposals to assist them. A good starting point for this would be a mechanism similar to the one in Serbia where Prosecutor, police and journalists associations work together on safety of journalists.

My Office will continue to flag and monitor cases of violations of media freedom and threats and attacks against journalists. Crucially, we will remind governments of their commitments and obligations to improve and ensure journalists’ safety.

Today, we will also address another topic, which is the situation of the public service media across the region with the co-operation of EBU. They still continue to lack sufficient funds, to struggle for full editorial and financial independence and to face great difficulties to develop. Public service broadcasters play a vital role in the sphere of information, and it must be ensured that they can work independently from political or economic interference. This is one of the long-standing issues in almost every country in the region. Political will in this respect is crucial and, unfortunately, has for a long time been almost non-existent. We need to find individual solutions for their sustainable financing, taking into account the transformation and mandate to serve the public interest. There are already some good existing practices, which we

will examine during our panel on the role of the public service media in the 21st century.

Digitalization not only affects public service media, it affects every facet of how we receive and impart information. Therefore, in order to ensure better media freedom, we also need to have better media literacy by the general public. The pertinent issue of media and information literacy in the digital age will be addressed in a side-event taking place during today's lunch break.

In session four, we will examine the legal environment in which journalists work and how the media are regulated by law. The panel will cover legal aspects and the impact of legislation on access to information as well as defamation law. My Office has provided many legal reviews of new laws in the past year.

Also, all too often, we hear of instances where laws are used to target and silence journalists, either because the laws are restrictive or overbroad, or because they are applied against their own spirit. We must be vigilant that laws intended for our protection and security and the fight against hate speech do not come at the cost of our freedom of expression and do not undermine media plurality. We need to discuss with legislators to find the right balance.

Since our last conference, my Office has closely been working with the authorities in Albania, Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia to improve their media legislation. In Albania, there is an on-going discussion on the law on media services. In Montenegro, my Office has provided legal reviews on the draft media law, the law on the public service broadcaster, and the law on electronic media. In Serbia, we are closely following the development of the country's new media strategy, while in North Macedonia we assisted the local authorities with laws on access to information and audio-visual media services.

During all my visits and discussions with different stakeholders over the last year, however, I have heard and also experienced myself that the laws pertaining to the media in South East Europe are often quite good but that the actual problem lies in their implementation. It is not sufficient for new laws simply to be written if they are not also properly enforced. Deeds, not words, are what we need by all actors when it comes to respecting media freedom and freedom of expression.

Tomorrow, during the lunch break, we will also have a special side-event organized by Human Rights Defenders dealing with the challenges faced by journalists writing on human rights issues and how discriminated groups, such as LGBT, are represented in the media.

In order to effectively address the above-mentioned challenges we need to first recognize them. Then, we have to confront them together, to find a way to protect journalists and help the media thrive in the region and, thus, safeguard our media freedom and the public's right to be informed.

To borrow a famous quote: "Freedom of the press belongs to everyone – to the citizen as well as the publisher. The crux is not the publisher's "freedom to print"; it is, rather, the citizen's right to know".

Solidarity, unity and strong co-operation between the media community within the countries but also regionally is crucial in tackling these issues. Non-governmental organizations and the international community need to be strong and persistent in demanding that the relevant authorities address all media freedom violations, without any delay.

Freedom of the media and freedom of expression are indispensable for democratic societies. If freedom of expression is under pressure in society, then a highly relevant component of the concept of comprehensive security and stability is at stake.

We need respect for diversity of views and opinions, and at the same time we need security to protect the journalists exercising their essential mission for society and we need solidarity to defend when those who speak out are attacked.

These could be the three great ideas that we will try to promote through this conference: diversity, security and solidarity.

Thank you all for being here and I look forward to the discussions ahead.