



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe  
Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media**



**Conference Outcomes**

The 7<sup>th</sup> OSCE South East Europe Media Conference co-organized by the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM) and the OSCE Mission to Serbia, with the support of other OSCE field operations in the region, was held online on 17-18 September 2020. The conference gathered around 200 participants including journalists, government representatives involving the public prosecution, law enforcement and judiciary, regional and international experts, and civil society representatives.

The event focused on the impact of COVID-19 on media freedom and the security challenges that journalists in South East Europe face while doing their job. It provided a platform for dedicated multi-stakeholder discussions and exchange of experience as well as best practices in establishing national mechanisms to reinforce and ensure comprehensive and inclusive approaches to journalists' safety.

This year, representatives from the police, the public prosecution offices and the judiciary joined the discussions and explored ways on how to ensure a safe and conducive media environment, both online and offline, and to combat impunity for crimes against journalists and other media professionals in the region. In this light, particular emphasis was placed on strengthening the implementation of national legal frameworks for media by relevant public institutions, and the ever-increasing need for the OSCE participating States to fortify the commitments outlined in the OSCE Ministerial Council Decision on Safety of Journalists.

The conclusions presented in this report are based on the panel session discussions.

## Session I: Opportunities and Challenges in Establishing an Efficient National Mechanism for Protection of Journalists – Serbia and the Netherlands Working Groups for Safety of Journalists

Establishing effective joint mechanisms at the national level showcases how strong collective efforts, involving all main actors, are key to ensuring a holistic and systematic response to the growing threats against journalists. Panellists in this session presented and discussed the mechanisms established in Serbia and the Netherlands for co-ordinated responses to threats and violence against journalists. Through the working groups in these two countries, the police, the prosecutor's office and media associations have developed innovative tools and measures to protect journalists from attacks and threats online and offline.

### Panel conclusions:

- Strengthened co-operation amongst various stakeholders to develop effective national preventative and protective mechanisms in order to reinforce and ensure safety of journalists;
- The need for greater transparency of the joint work by the prosecution, police and journalists in the area of safety in order to enhance awareness and trust among the public and media community;
- The need for enhanced and inclusive sensitization efforts targeting law enforcement authorities and the public prosecution to raise awareness on the importance of journalism and media freedom related issues;
- The necessity for adjusting legal frameworks to cover all aspects of safety of journalists and their harmonized implementation by relevant authorities;
- Co-operation with social media networks in order to boost response efforts to threats and attacks against journalists online.

## Session II: Unifying National Databases, Analysis and Reporting on Attacks and Violence against Journalists

Robust, harmonized and gender-responsive mechanisms for data collection, analysis and reporting on violations of journalists' safety are essential to ensure that prevention, protection and prosecution efforts are well informed and appropriately targeted. The panellists in this session exchanged current regional practices and good examples in the area of data management on safety of journalists, and explored ways in which existing data collection initiatives could be better harmonized and unified.

As a starting point in furthering data collection tools and mechanisms, participants stressed the need to strengthen communication and co-operation between journalists, law enforcement and the judiciary, to address any gaps, and thereby, ensure a safe working environment for media in the region.

### Panel conclusions:

- The need to create and strengthen, where possible, harmonized and gender-responsive mechanisms for data collection, analysis and reporting on violations of journalists' safety;
- To establish and enhance regular communication and co-operation between journalists, media associations, law enforcement and the judiciary in order to create better safety nets and prevent attacks and impunity for crimes against journalists;

- The necessity to strengthen judicial follow-up by prosecutors in order to ensure that crimes against journalists do not go unpunished and unreported;
- To overcome the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic on journalists to properly report cases of attacks and pressure on media freedom and freedom of expression.

### Session III: **COVID-19's Impact on Media Freedom in the Western Balkans**

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed major challenges to fundamental human rights with the introduction of restrictive measures affecting freedom of expression, freedom of the media and access to information. Panellists in this session discussed the difficulties presented by COVID-19 related restrictions on these core pillars of democracy.

While it was assessed that strong measures to fight the present health crisis were important, those directly affecting freedom of the media and freedom of expression added additional pressure on media and journalists to perform their important work during times of crisis. The participants and experts highlighted the shrinking media space and an ever-growing need to secure decent working conditions for journalists and other media professionals in order to enable a plurality of voices to flourish, and thereby, prevent disinformation. This is particularly crucial in times of crisis when the public most needs unhindered access to accurate, relevant and reliable information.

#### **Panel conclusions:**

- The need for greater financial support for local media and freelance journalists in order to ensure media sustainability, plurality of voices, and the free flow of information in the region;
- Enhanced self-regulation to ensure credible and reliable information instead of restrictive legislation in the fight against misinformation, disinformation and propaganda in times of crisis;
- Journalists and editors should revise ethical standards to synchronize with the realities of the present COVID-19 crisis, and enhance engagement of press councils to enforce and raise standards and ethics as a way to build trust in media in the region;
- Recognition of the imperative role that investigative journalists and media play in times of crisis and the importance of unhindered access to information;
- The need for independent commissions to ensure that financial support provided to the media does not translate into political interference;
- Encourage multi-stakeholder co-operation involving journalists, media organizations, academics and public officials to combat misinformation, pressure on the media and restrictions on access to information.

### Session IV: **Silencing Women Journalists - From Portraying to Online Harassment**

Women journalists from the region shared their stories and experiences about the attacks and threats they endured while carrying out their journalistic work. They continue to be particularly targeted for harassment and abuse online, not only for being a journalist but also due to their gender. Such a hostile environment has a detrimental impact, not only on their individual safety and wellbeing, but also on their journalistic work and the free flow of information. Female journalists often resort to self-censorship, while in many instances threats go unreported and/or unpunished.

In this session, panellists discussed the need for stronger actions to improve gender equality in society as an essential stepping-stone in enhancing the safety of women journalists in the media. In line with this, participants underscored the importance of mainstreaming a gender-responsive approach in existing and future mechanisms on the safety of journalists in the region. A preview of the OSCE RFoM's Resource Guide on Safety of Female Journalists Online was also presented during the session.

**Panel conclusions:**

- Enhanced understanding among different actors of the gender-specific threats and challenges female journalists face in order to raise awareness on the risks and improve protection of female journalists;
- The need for a comprehensive and inclusive dialogue with relevant State authorities to integrate a gender-responsive approach in the area of prevention, protection and prosecution against attacks and threats targeting female journalists both online and offline;
- Recognition of gender inequality in the media sector where the majority of senior level positions continue to be reserved for, and held by, men;
- Application of tailored training on gender-responsive approaches for all actors involved in the protection of journalists.