



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

Opening Remarks

OSCE Representative of Freedom of the Media

Monday, 16 September 10am-1pm

HDIM venue plenary hall

Thank you Madam Director, dear Ingibjörg,

Mr. Chair,

Mr. Secretary General,

Mr. High Commissioner on National Minorities,

Mr. President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly,

Distinguished Representatives of Civil Society,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First and foremost, I would like to thank ODIHR for their efforts in organizing this year's conference, and Poland for hosting us.

It is a great pleasure to be in Warsaw again on this special year of the 30th anniversary of the democratic transition in Poland, with so many civil society organizations and representatives from the participating States. The achievement and role of the free press were key in the events of the democratic revolution of Poland and in the velvet revolution in Europe in general.

Many sessions and side-events will be dedicated to media freedom during this first week, most of them during the first three days actually, and I hope that we can take a thorough look at the situation of freedom of expression and media freedom across the OSCE region, and at the many challenges that journalists continue to face in their work.

We live in a time where journalists and the press are not only facing the challenges of digital transformation, "fake news" and disinformation; they are also besieged by intimidation, threats and attacks of many kinds.

However, sometimes there is good news and, for once, I would like to begin with this. In the past few days and weeks have been marked by the release of an author and of several journalists that we, as an institution, as well as the many civil society organisations here, have been defending for a long time.

Just last week in Turkey the Cumhuriyet journalists Musa Kart, a well-known cartoonist, Güray Öz, Hakan Kara, Önder Çelik, and Mustafa Kemal Güngör, his colleagues, were released, after the Supreme Court of Appeals overturned their sentences.

I am relieved by this decision. They should never have spent so much time behind bars. I hope that this momentum will be used to release all other journalists and media workers imprisoned for their work in the country, including Emre İper, the accountant of the newspaper.

A few days earlier, on 7 September, it was Kirill Vyshinsky, the director of RIA Novosti Office in Kyiv, Roman Suschenko, a journalist for Ukrinform, and Oleg Sentsov, the well-known author, who were released in Kyiv and Moscow. This shows that we must never lose hope; that we must never renounce from raising situations, from pronouncing names, and that, through dialogue and political will, progress is possible.

But many other journalists are still detained in the OSCE region, including in some of the mentioned OSCE participating States. There is still much to do.

Last year, the Ministerial Council adopted a landmark decision on Safety of Journalists. In this decision, the 57 ministers not only raise the issue of physical safety, but also I quote, “urge the immediate and unconditional release of all journalists who have been arbitrarily arrested or detained, taken hostage or who have become victims of enforced disappearance”.

I call on all participating States to implement this Ministerial Decision and to release all imprisoned journalists.

I noted in my latest report to the Permanent Council in July that, in the past 7 months, I intervened on 121 individual cases of detention and imprisonment of journalists and media workers in the OSCE region.

This is an alarming situation, which has to be urgently addressed. No journalist in our region should be imprisoned because of their reporting, investigation or critical opinion.

It's time to protect the legal safety of journalists as we would protect their physical safety.

Physical safety is still at risk and we have seen too many instances of physical harassment, threats and violent attacks against journalists in an attempt to intimidate or silence them, in the past year since the last HDIM.

By adopting the Ministerial Council Decision on Safety of Journalists last December, all 57 participating States confirmed that safety of journalists is our shared goal and that we need to urgently act on improving it and combating impunity.

My Office and I are looking for more practical steps to support the urgent implementation of these commitments.

We are here today to defend media freedom and safety of journalists because, when they are assaulted, it's not just the profession which is at risk, it is the right of the citizens to be informed; it is the existence of a public space for diverse and critical opinions; it is the possibility to hold those in power accountable; it is democracy itself.

We live in a time of profound transformation of the information sphere, which opens many opportunities, but also makes business models of the press more fragile, as well as the survival of many newspapers and newsrooms, and the possibility for journalists to provide reliable and quality information.

In the age of “fake news” and disinformation, we need, more than ever, professional and ethical journalism as a pillar of democracy.

That is why we need to protect free, independent and diverse media.

And that is why we must work tirelessly to implement the OSCE commitments of these enabling rights of freedom of expression and media freedom.

I am looking forward to our rich and frank exchanges this week in our many side events and sessions.

Thank you for your attention.