



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
Teresa Ribeiro

**Hearing on State of Media Freedom in the OSCE Region,
U.S. Helsinki Commission, 19 October**

Dear Chairman Cardin,
Distinguished Commissioners,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the invitation to discuss with you today the state of media freedom and freedom of expression in the OSCE region.

It is a great honour to meet with members of your commission, which is a strong supporter of the mandate and the role of my Institution in defending media freedom and freedom of expression.

My message today is not a cheerful one. When reporting to the OSCE Permanent Council last May, providing the 57 participating States with my assessment of media freedom in the region, I stated that I saw a bleak picture. I ended my statement by expressing the hope that I would be able to return with a more uplifting message.

That will not be the case, I am afraid.

During the last few months alone, five media workers were killed in our region. In March, Turkish radio presenter Hazım Özsu was murdered, while in April, journalist Giorgos Karaivaz was shot dead in front of his home in Greece in broad daylight. In June, correspondent Maharram Ibrahimov and camera operator Siraj Abishov lost their lives in a landmine explosion in Azerbaijan. Less than a month later, Dutch investigative reporter Peter R. de Vries was shot on the streets of Amsterdam, dying a week later.

They paid the ultimate price, while many more journalists suffered harassment, abuse and violence. I see a steady decline in media freedom all over the OSCE region, a climate that worries me greatly. A climate in which many do no longer seem to understand what is at stake. In which many seem to fail to recall the fundamental idea that media is more than a provider of daily news. In which many seem to have forgotten that free and independent media are one of the core pillars of our democracies.

I could mention Belarus, where we witnessed the gravest deterioration. It has therefore been on top of my agenda since the beginning of my mandate. I have reached out to the country's leadership, but to no avail. I am in touch with journalists in the country, whose courage and

commitment I salute, and I promise that I will continue to speak out on violations that need to be condemned and documented.

However, even though Belarus warrants a separate mention, journalists all over have come under mounting pressure. The recent awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize was a boost for two courageous journalists and a boost for all those defending our freedom of expression on a daily basis.

But also a message that was badly needed – to remind the world of the importance of this fundamental principle. It was yet another reminder that we live in a time in which accusing media outlets and individual journalists of publishing “fake” and biased news has become second nature for some authorities and other vocal groups in society. A time, in which a growing number of people consider it normal to harass, threaten, intimidate and abuse media workers.

Last year, my office published a special report on the issue of the safety of media during public gatherings. For all too often, law enforcement officers hinder and abuse journalists who are reporting on such events, instead of protecting them. And all too often, the anger that drives people to the streets is directed at those media workers, accusing them of being biased and of belonging to the so-called “corrupt mainstream media”.

Your country is no exception, I am afraid, with the Press Freedom tracker showing an increase from 39 records of such cases in 2019 to 421 in 2020. I do not need to remind you that the authorities have an obligation to protect the media and hold all perpetrators to account. Police reforms and training are needed, with mutual understanding and trust between law enforcement and media workers as a long-term investment. As the OSCE can be an important place to collect and develop good practices, I will continue to work on this.

It is however, not only on the streets where journalists have to fear for their safety. Legal harassment and abuse of the judicial system against the media is on the rise, with the law being misused to prevent journalists from doing its work. People with power and money threaten and sue the media, when they get too close to a sometimes-uncomfortable truth. This poses a serious threat to the safety and the economic basis of media workers and outlets and, hence, has a strong chilling effect on media pluralism and undermines journalistic freedom in the OSCE region. I will publish a report on this issue in the coming weeks.

I am encouraged by the fact that in some parts of the United States there is movement towards regulation that can prevent, or mitigate the effects of, so-called Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation, or SLAPPs. I am also encouraged by the recent commitment of the US administration to discontinue the use of secret subpoenas to obtain reporters’ records during leak investigations.

Aside from the streets and courtrooms, many media workers have to fear for their safety in their offices and homes, when going on internet. An ever more important source of information for many journalists on the one hand, internet has also become a place of daily abuse and intimidation. Women journalists especially face threats of rape, physical violence and graphic imagery that show up in their inboxes and on their social media platforms as they go about their workday. Nearly two out of three women journalists have had the experience of being threatened or harassed online. Having published a special resource guide in an attempt to tackle

this issue last year, me and my office are committed in our fight against this threat to media pluralism.

Yet, there is more. All over the OSCE region, I witness a downward spiral when it comes to free access to information. In the atmosphere of growing anti-media sentiment and distrust, people are increasingly caught in their own information bubble. After decades of growing access to information through new information technologies, the reappearance of political walls and "red lines" have led to an ever more inward-looking approach of authorities regarding sources and flows of information.

A similar development can be witnessed in cross-border journalism. Journalists who come from, or have (financial) ties to parties in, another participating State are increasingly hindered in doing their work. They face travel restrictions, administrative sanctions, outright bans, labelled as being "foreign agents" and other oftentimes draconian measures. I have addressed this issue with several participating states, in meetings and press releases, and in a recent communique. I keep reminding them that such obstructions have a notable impact, on the international exchange of information, something that was always considered highly important for strengthening trust and co-operation within our region. This is a fundamental principle enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act, and central to the unique concept of comprehensive security for the OSCE area. Today it results in restricted access to many of the media and information that appear as "foreign", "unwanted", "unfriendly", "non-patriotic" or simply too critical or different from the official narratives. A dangerous trend, with ever more states feeling emboldened by the restrictions of other participating States.

A word on internet intermediaries, or social media platforms in particular: public perception is that they are too powerful, too pervasive and unaccountable. We need to take action to protect democracy, while preventing authoritarian models of governance of the platforms to prevail. In this context, we also must not forget the positive obligation of government to protect our human rights, including the right to freedom of expression online. It is a challenge we cannot simply dismiss.

In concluding, I think we are seeing a steady decrease in trust in the media and its democratic function, combined with, and fuelled by, a growing urge to manipulate and twist independent media for the own good. This is not a new development. However, with the current possibilities to spread disinformation at an incredible speed and with an enormous amount of ways to hide its true nature, this trend is becoming ever more dangerous. We need to fight disinformation – but not with more restrictive laws or by closing or suspending media outlets. Instead, we should promote quality journalism and a vibrant pluralistic media landscape.

This is exactly what my mandate is about. As part of a regional intergovernmental framework, it is my task to engage in a dialogue with all participating States and to assist them in their upholding of their media freedom commitments. I will put to use all political and diplomatic channels at my avail to find sustainable solutions to many of these problems.

I have done so from the start. As soon as conditions allowed for this, I started to travel again. Country visits are important for meetings with all relevant stakeholders. I visited Germany, Sweden, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and last week Albania. And there a more countries, including the Russian Federation and the South-Caucasus region, in the pipeline. My aim is to visit all OSCE participating States. To make such visits even more worthwhile, I meet

with journalist's organizations and local media freedom experts ahead of the visit, in order to be informed on all the latest developments in the specific country.

In the same vein, I have continued our regional conferences, in both Central Asia and the South-East Europe region. Those are important platforms and networking occasions to work with journalists and authorities on the most persistent trends in the region. With such cross-country and regional dialogue, we fully use the convening power of the OSCE – to build strong networks across these regions. I hope we will soon be able to move from hybrid to more in-person meetings.

Aside from all of this, rest assured that I will continue to use my voice to draw attention to the gravest problems – especially when the life or safety of journalists are at risk. I have done so many times, already, and I will keep doing this. However, in order to find long-term, sustainable solutions, I always want to take into account the broader perspective, going beyond single incidents, which are often mere symptoms of systemic problems.

To be able to do this properly and in a persistent manner, I need a well-staffed Office, including sufficient funding, and co-operation of participating States. In this light, I want to use this opportunity to thank the US for the support I have received. It is important that the OSCE and my Office can count on predictable and reliable funding that keeps track with increasing demands and growing costs.

For I cannot do this alone. We carry a shared responsibility.

The US is one of the oldest strongholds of freedom of expression with a vibrant media landscape and civil society. Your country has always been an important ally to protect media freedom worldwide. This includes the backing from, and co-operation with, organizations like yours, the Helsinki Commission. In addition, I welcome very much, recent signals of renewed commitment by the new administration.

I think it is worth it.

The OSCE, with its comprehensive security approach, is an excellent place for finding solutions to protect human rights, while simultaneously providing more security.

I am looking forward to continue this worthy endeavour.

Thank you for your attention and the invitation.