



OPENING REMARKS

9th South East Europe Media Conference (SEEMC)

**'At a crossroads: Safeguarding media freedom to protect democracy'
16 May 2023, Skopje**

Speaking time of 10 minutes

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you all to our 9th South East Europe Media Conference, which I am jointly hosting, in co-operation with the OSCE Mission to Skopje, and in collaboration with the OSCE field operations from this region.

Let me start by thanking our experts, State authorities, representatives from the media community, civil society and international organizations who have accepted to participate in these two days of discussions. A big thank you also goes to all colleagues in the OSCE field missions in the Southeast Europe region and the interpreters for making this meeting possible.

When the mandate of the Representative on Freedom of the Media, the mandate that I proudly serve, was established over 25 years ago, the OSCE participating States recognized that media freedom based on freedom of expression and information is an crucial pillar of democracy, and essential to a free, secure and open society. A key element for the protection and preservation of all other human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Without an independent and free media, a democracy cannot exist. For this reason, freedom of the press has often been used as an indicator of the condition of a democracy – where journalists come under pressure, sooner or later democracy also comes under pressure – and vice versa: where democracy withers away, media freedom falls victim.

Unfortunately, in many countries in the OSCE region, including those in Southeast Europe, media freedom continues to suffer greatly. The challenges and threats media and journalists face are becoming ever more complex and more interlinked. The threats are real and concerning in their own right, but their impact on the state of democracy is what makes them truly alarming.

We see a growth of various forms of attacks against media freedom and freedom of expression, ranging from verbal and physical attacks against journalists. But also coordinated online smear campaigns and harassment, especially targeting female journalists and those investigating instances of corruption and other sensitive issues of public interest.

Safety of journalists has always been a top priority of my institution, and is of utmost importance to the media freedom situation in the region. Last year, we have decided to follow up on the landmark 2018 OSCE Ministerial Council Decision on the Safety of Journalists. In order to do so, I have launched a new project on the issue with an aim to take stock of what has been done so far to effectively implement the commitments stemming from this Decision, and to see where my Office can provide concrete assistance and guidance to all OSCE participating States in improving the safety of journalists. You will have an opportunity today to engage in two sessions that are taking part within the framework of this project; one is a roundtable on legal harassment and the other a workshop on developing a toolbox for safety of journalists.

Other pressing media freedom issues that I have observed in the region and beyond during my tenure so far, include mounting censorship, media capture and legal repression. There is also an over-flooding of our online information spaces with harmful disinformation and other negative effects of artificial intelligence in shaping and arbitrating online information.

All of this threatens public's trust in accurate, quality public interest media. This further undermines journalists' safety, integrity and ability to perform their important work, while harming and destabilizing our democracies.

At the same time, media are grappling with existential crises of an economic nature, as they search for innovative ways to sustain their operations in an increasingly volatile media market and scarcity of funds.

This year's South East Europe Media Conference, "At a crossroads: Safeguarding media freedom to protect democracy", serves to take meaningful stock of how to safeguard media freedom in order to protect and sustain our democratic societies in the context of the growing challenges to journalism.

Those who have joined us for earlier versions of this regional media freedom conference, might have noticed that we have chosen a slightly different set-up for this year's edition, with more

sessions and side-events, including in parallel, and with different formats. With this new approach, we would want to engage of all you in our discussions, challenging old ideas, while exploring new venues. As you can see in the agenda before you, you will have an opportunity to examine various aspects affecting media freedom today, including those related to safety of journalists, media self-regulation, artificial intelligence and freedom of expression, media and digital literacy, hate speech and media viability.

I am confident that our two-day exchange will be a refreshing and valuable contribution to our better understanding of the importance of safeguarding media freedom to protect our democracies. And in doing so, helping us to reflect on the pressing issues and concerns and viable solutions to them.

I thank you for your attention.