

Opening Remarks

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SOUTH EAST EUROPE MEDIA CONFERENCE: JOURNALISM IN TIMES OF CRISIS
11 October, Tirana

Dear Madam Representative, Your Excellency Prime Minister, Excellences, dear participants, ladies and gentlemen

I am honoured to address this important conference, in front of so many high-level speakers and such a qualified audience. I greet each and everyone of you, those who are sitting here in this room and those who are connected remotely.

Meaningful events do not take place accidentally. They entail a vision, a sense of purpose and a good dose of determination in pursuing them. Let me express my gratitude to Madam Representative on Freedom of the Media, my colleague Teresa Ribeiro, for granting her wholehearted support to the organization of today's conference here in Tirana and for her strong leadership. And I extend my gratitude to H.E. Prime Minister Edi Rama for his prompt support and personal engagement. Major events also rely on tested teams, and acknowledgements go to all the teams involved in the preparatory work, from Vienna to our sister OSCE field missions in the region, and of course to my own team.

The last time that Albania hosted this regional conference was in 2013. If I am entitled to add a personal note, 2013 was when I first visited this beautiful country and my "love story" with the Albanian people has continued ever since / *dashuria ime për popullin shqiptar*. The impressive progress achieved by the country in many areas in the meantime only adds to my respect.

Now allow me to share with you some remarks on the agenda of our two days' work ahead. Journalism in a time of crisis is unfortunately a very fitting title. Crisis is becoming to some extent our 'new normal'. The participants, who are connected remotely, remind us of the constraints we are still facing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I will not repeat here how the pandemic impacts the functioning of democratic institutions. We actually experience a fair number of crises within and beyond the OSCE area. Whether in time of "good weather", of crisis, or of challenges, journalism remains a fundamental piece of any democratic puzzle and an extraordinary driver of social progress for any society.

Hence, the purpose of this conference: to hold an open and professional debate on the potential and challenges for our media landscape. We want to look ahead and, since we are in an OSCE exercise, we need to keep our eyes on the big picture. To my own eyes, the bigger picture translates into placing individuals first, working for an **open** society, and contributing to a secure international order. And here the role of the media is paramount. Media as an objective to be supported per se, for reasons that are well known and hence pointless to list. But maybe, above all, because media needs to be seen as a social synapse, an enabler and a vehicle that connects social layers, institutions, state and non-state actors, and citizens.

Let us look for a moment at numbers: compare today's South-East Europe to 20 years ago and it becomes obvious that progress of media is beyond contestation. With a population close to **18 million people**, this region has an enormous variety of media outlets: around **3,500** currently active media outlets, an internet penetration rate **between 80 and 90%**, and **10 journalism departments at universities**.

These numbers signify - at least in principle - a substantial general freedom of media, an area where information circulates without obstacles and where journalists are interconnected. It is not by accident that the OSCE Presence in Albania is conducting - in parallel to this conference - a meeting of the Youth Trail, a programme to ensure interconnection, also for young journalists. We want to have the young people have a say on the way media shapes their lives, our lives. And I wanted to have this discussion here in Tirana, which is bound to host next year the European Youth Capital.

This overall freedom of media should never be taken for granted, nowhere in the world. And, when obstacles arise, they should be addressed swiftly and seriously. **For instance, we need to make sure that journalists can operate in a conducive environment, a safe one, in principle with free access to information. We need to support fact-based journalism, actively rejecting fake news, and ensure the independence of journalists from media ownership control. I am speaking here about an environment that reflects today's realities, social diversity and plurality.**

Let me now offer you some thoughts on some of the other panels. Bottom line is that journalism is a strategic partner of state institutions and of citizens in the effort to unlock society, to confront polarization, and to build security. It is not necessarily a new "division of labour". I am actually wondering whether we should not simply reflect on a profound truth.

Let us take a step back and once again look at the bigger picture. When we observe today's dynamics, we observe two different worlds. The first is a world with national borders; it is the world we were taught in school, when I was a child at least, the result of classical inter-state relations of a Westphalian nature. The second is a world with an unprecedented number of networks, the so-called "connected" world. It is a world we observe from outer space following the corridors of lights; a world of the digital platforms.

Facebook, for instance, has **2.85 billion active monthly users globally**, which is *more than double the population of the OSCE region* (approx. **1 billion 289 million inhabitants**). Instagram alone with **one billion global users** comes close to the inhabitants of the entire OSCE region.

These numbers reflect the strength and the potential of the connected world, of individuals, but also of those new digital platforms giants. Connectivity per se is not enough to connect people. To connect people we need to give them a sense of purpose, and again we badly need media, good media, to help achieving this major objective.

Especially in times of crisis, in a time of general vacuum even of an ethical nature, quality journalism is fundamental to offer individuals a compass to navigate the ocean of information. Media become fundamental **partners** of the State in contributing to the empowerment of the people, in strengthening the resilience of the nation, and ultimately the security for all. When I say partner, I am thinking strategically, certainly not meaning that partnership translates into alignment and non-criticism. In the last three days, I had the opportunity to exchange with the young journalists, and I can only trust that the final panel on youth perspectives will give us the chance to receive their valuable input on the future of media in this region, their role, and on how they interpret media self-regulation. The dilemma between regulation and self-regulation is actually a very critical one.

Trust is yet another key concept, or I should maybe say the lack of it. I am wondering whether this is possibly an additional challenge for this region. Importantly, trust is at the grassroots of any partnership between institutions and media, but also between public and media. Trust in quality journalism is a fundamental arrow in our pouch in confronting fake news.

In conclusion, I would point the cursor to us, the OSCE, and to my colleagues from the diplomatic corps. What is our role here? I truly believe that we still have an immense role to play to help people connect, to give them a sense of purpose, to work together against polarization and for a more secure world. Diplomats as carriers of a new diplomacy in a new world. This is exactly what we as the OSCE are doing: listening without exception to all interlocutors and making available a neutral table to those willing to engage in dialogue, to support policies and to connect. Because we truly believe in the enormous added value of getting individuals involved in the discourse about security, we have embraced the whole-of-society approach and we concretely mainstream youth and gender across all our programmatic activities, as was clearly acknowledged by all the interlocutors during the recent visit of our Chairperson-in-Office few days ago.

This is the unique and holistic understanding of security, which is embedded in our fundamental documents, and which is translated into our daily activities everywhere where an OSCE field mission is operating on the ground.

Thank you! Faleminderit!