



**Speech for the 3rd Committee of the OSCE PA
General Committee on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions
24th February 2023**

**Special debate focused on the topic of
'Accountability for human rights abuses during times of conflict'**

Excellencies, Chairman and Members of the General Committee on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions,

It has been exactly one year since our world changed. One year ago, I addressed this Committee just the day after the Russian Federation's full scale invasion of Ukraine.

I remember back then, I was struggling to assess the consequences of the headline that was all over the news – and what this would mean for our common security, our region and our Organization. Nobody did.

And today, one year into this deadly, devastating and horrifying war, we witness in Ukraine shattered cities, thousands of dead, millions without a home.

We feel the consequences throughout our region and in this very Organization: our common values and commitments, the foundation which our Organization is based upon – cooperation and trust – have fallen victim to this devastating war.

It is also devastating for the media in Ukraine. Hundreds of media outlets were forced to shut down as a result of the war. So, when rebuilding the destroyed infrastructure in Ukraine, we will also have to think about rebuilding and supporting the Ukrainian media sector, which will require a holistic international response.

The media workers that stayed, or came to Ukraine to report on the war, run great risks. The safety of journalists reporting from these conflict zones is of major concern. At least eight journalists and media workers, national and international, have been killed while on duty. Many more have been wounded or forced to relocate.

It is stating the obvious, but let me say it once again, clear and sound: no journalist should be targeted for doing their job. Not in situations of armed conflict and not in peaceful times.

The consequences of this war and its run-up are also very tangible in the Russian Federation, where journalists risk imprisonment and high fines if they even mention the word “war” when reporting on the devastation caused by the Russian Federation in Ukraine. Hundreds of journalists have been labelled as “foreign agents” and several independent outlets as “undesired organizations”.

We are witnessing the most severe clampdown on independent journalism in our region since the establishment of the RFoM Institution 25 years ago. Almost all highly respected independent news outlets were forced to leave the country and continue their operations from abroad.

This systematic clamp-down on media freedom is not confined to the Russian Federation alone. Regretfully, the same holds true for the Belarusian independent media community. Dozens of journalists in Belarus face criminal prosecution and imprisonment on trumped up charges, while hundreds have left the country to be able to do their work without repression or having to fear for violent attacks.

All of these media workers deserve our solidarity and support.

And this goes for all journalists in our region; the regressing media freedom situation is unfortunately a reality in many parts of the OSCE. With the backsliding of democracy comes the repression of independent voices and vice versa. I cannot stress enough the essential role of free, independent and impartial media for peaceful, democratic and just societies.

Parliaments have a central role to play when it comes to ensuring an enabling environment for journalists and preserving media freedom. Now is the time to act, for all of us, if we want to turn the tide on this downward spiral.

When the Mandate of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media was established 25 years ago, a Mandate that I am proud to hold for over two years now, the participating States understood very well the important role that free media play for peace and security in our region. But is it still the case today?

In today’s climate of crises, turbulence and uncertainty, more than ever we need political will and a strong commitment to media freedom as a key pillar for security. The sad reality, however, is oftentimes quite the opposite.

Political will to protect journalists is being traded for hostility against the media; tearing down its crucial role in democracy, peace, and security. Antagonism to freedom of speech has become commonplace in too many parts of the OSCE region – with a range of strategies, from censorship, media capture, and legal repression to the over-flooding of information spaces with disinformation, and in some cases even the weaponisation of speech itself – including through state-led influence operations – as a tool to engineer a war.

In times like these, it is not only expedient, but necessary, to discuss and strategize around the large number of emerging challenges, challenges that are growing in scale and complexity. It is against this backdrop that I published the report entitled “Can there be security without media freedom” – a report that is based on consultations with nine eminent experts and that serves us all with a critical assessment of the role of the media for peace and security. You can find it on the RFoM website and I encourage you all to read it.

The topic of today’s session, accountability for human rights abuses in times of conflict, is a very crucial one. Because there can be no lasting peace if there is no justice – an important lesson that we have learnt throughout history.

Let me remind you of the critical role that journalists play in this context. They not only report on the developments and events in the conflict zones, putting themselves in enormous danger. They also gather and collect valuable information and data on human rights abuses that are essential for future accountability mechanisms, be it on a national or international level. Journalists are at the forefront when it comes to being witness of such horrible crimes, and their reporting and documentation can support evidence for trials and convictions.

Fortunately, there are still journalists willing to fulfil this double role in times of conflict, often at high costs. This is why their safety is key. I will continue to do everything I can in order to promote journalist’s safety, both in times of peace and conflict.

Thank you.