



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

**CONFERENCE
Freedom of the Media and Safety of Journalists in the Russian Federation and in the
OSCE region: Challenges and Opportunities in the Digital Age
6 November 2019, Moscow**

Opening remarks by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

TO BE CHECKED AGAINST DELIVERY

Mr. Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to this Conference on “Freedom of the Media and Safety of Journalists in the Russian Federation and in the OSCE region”, organized by my Office with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.

This is the first time that such a conference is organized under the auspices of the OSCE in Russia, on media freedom issues.

I want to thank the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, for having accepted my proposition to hold this conference in Moscow.

Agreeing to have this debate does not mean that we pretend to agree on everything. It does mean, though, that we consider that there are matters worth discussing, that there are common issues of concern especially on safety of journalists, and that there is room for debate.

I hope that this conference will allow for an open discussion. There will be contradictions, controversy and, I hope, also convergences, during this event today. But, in any case, we thought that this debate was necessary.

Because there is a lot at stake, in Russia and in the OSCE region, for safety of journalists, freedom of expression, access to information, the regulation of the Internet, and the free flow of information regardless of borders.

On many occasions, as the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, I have intervened with the authorities of OSCE participating States on alarming situations involving infringements on the rights of reporters, and the ability of media outlets to fulfill their activities freely, especially in cases where the physical and legal safety of journalists are at risk.

Regrettably, journalism remains a dangerous profession, as violence and intimidation of media workers regularly take place.

Throughout the OSCE region we have seen journalists prosecuted, attacked or even killed because of their reporting, their investigation or their dissenting views.

This conference will give us a chance to discuss how the OSCE commitments on freedom of expression and freedom of the media can be fulfilled by the governments, in Russia and in the other OSCE participating States, to acknowledge achievements and to address shortcomings.

In Russia, I have raised my concerns on several occasions. Sometimes about the legislations affecting the media, and other times on individual cases of journalists and media outlets.

I have intervened on instances of violence against journalists, including during public demonstrations, like on 27 July 2019 in Moscow.

Recently, I welcomed the decision to release Ivan Golunov, and to dismiss several people related to the false accusations against him.

And it is important for me that he can take part in this conference today, as well as Igor Rudnikov from Kaliningrad and Kirill Vyshinsky, who was detained in Ukraine. All of their releases were particularly moving for me as we had intervened to the authorities on their behalf, and I am very happy to have the opportunity to meet them today.

Kirill Vyshinsky's release was special as it involved two OSCE participating States, and that it also resulted in the release of Roman Sushchenko and Oleg Sentsov, both from Ukraine.

I am still concerned by the situation of other journalists, like Svetlana Prokopyeva a contributor to Radio Ekho Moskhvy in Pskov, who is facing accusations of condoning terrorism for her reporting.

I also raised on several occasions the necessity to ensure that there is no impunity for crimes committed against journalists, and the imperative to identify and prosecute all those involved in the murders of journalists, including those of Anna Politkovskaya, but also Pavel Sheremet in Ukraine and Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Constitution of the Russian Federation guarantees free speech, the universal right to obtain, produce, and disseminate information, as well as media freedom. Censorship is prohibited.

Russia also took voluntary commitments at the international level, in the OSCE, regarding the respect and protection of media freedom.

We can build on it and this is the base on which we work with the authorities and with media partners and journalists associations to promote freedom of the media.

As I do in all OSCE participating States, I have raised my concerns on several legislations that have a potential negative impact on media freedom, or which impose excessive restrictions on freedom of speech and information.

For example, the laws related to combating extremism activities. I noted that the Supreme Court, in September 2018, recommended to carefully distinguish between cases of extremist nature and publicly harmless offenses. I think this decision is going in the right direction.

We also have concerns with a recent set of laws on “disrespect” to the state and the spread of “fake news”.

I also raised the issue of the application of the Foreign Agent Law to media entities which represents an additional constraint on the activity of several media, and I am concerned by the recent call of a State Douma Commission to consider such media as Deutsch Welle as foreign agents.

Regarding the regulation of the Internet, in recent years, my Office has addressed a number of changes in the legislation affecting freedom of expression, and access to information.

We have also seen new legislative changes and related steps that seek to create a “sovereign” Internet.

All the developments around the regulation of the Internet are very important, as they will determine the future of information and of media freedom.

The Internet has opened many opportunities and we see the flourishing of new online media in Russia like everywhere. And I think that it is important to guarantee that the free access to the global Internet will remain unhindered in the future.

But at the same time, we are also confronted with a number of worrying trends, which raises a discussion internationally, about the dissemination of terrorists content, hate speech, incitement to violence, “fake news” and disinformation.

We must ensure that any restriction for security reason will be necessary and proportionate and doesn't impede freedom of expression in general.

In this context, journalists and media organizations have an even more important role to play to promote the quality of information, and the answer to this is not in censorship. It is, rather, in pluralism of the media, diversity of sources, debunking of manipulation of information and professional standards of journalism.

That's why, during this conference, we will discuss these issues and the role of Journalism in the digital age, Fact-Checking initiatives and Media Literacy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have just mentioned my many interventions to the Russian authorities.

But I would also like to refer to the fact that I have also intervened to other OSCE participating States about the situation of Russian journalists or Russian media when they have faced denial of entry to other participating States and difficulties with accreditations.

I think we should always encourage the free flow of information and free circulation of journalists from all OSCE participating States.

But, the first issue we will discuss today is the safety of journalists.

It was here, in Moscow, in 1991, that the OSCE participating States agreed to “adopt, where appropriate, all feasible measures to protect journalists engaged in dangerous professional missions, particularly in cases of armed conflict, and will co-operate to that effect”.

Last December in Milan, all 57 OSCE participating States, including Russia, adopted a Ministerial Council Decision on Safety of Journalists, which confirms that we still need to improve the situation.

The Decision contains a number of important political commitments and provides recommendations for bolstering journalists’ safety and combating impunity of crimes against journalists.

It is the duty of the States to protect journalists, and it is crucial that the perpetrators and masterminds of related crimes are timely and effectively identified and face justice.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Throughout the course of the day, we will openly discuss and exchange information and experiences on media freedom developments, among representatives of state and non-state media, media experts and government officials at the highest level.

I am glad to see so many participants today, both from Moscow and from the various regions of the Russian Federation, as well as experts from several international media organizations.

With all of you here today, I am confident that this conference will provide a good opportunity to reflect on the media freedom situation in the Russian Federation and across the OSCE region.

I hope that we will, all together, engage in a constructive dialogue on the way forward, so as to protect the media community and ensure the respect for the OSCE commitments on media freedom.

I look forward to our discussion.

Thank you for your attention.