



CONFERENCE REPORT **7TH SOUTH EAST EUROPE MEDIA CONFERENCE**

The New Frontline:
Working Together to Foster Media Freedom
17-18 September 2020

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Conference Outcomes



The seventh OSCE South East Europe Media Conference co-organized by the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM) and the OSCE Mission to Serbia, with the support of other OSCE field operations in the region, was held online on 17-18 September 2020. The conference gathered around 200 participants including journalists, government representatives involving the public prosecution, law enforcement and judiciary, regional and international experts, and civil society representatives.

The event focused on the impact of COVID-19 on media freedom and the security challenges that journalists in South East Europe face while doing their job. It provided a platform for dedicated multi-stakeholder discussions and exchange of experience as well as best practices in establishing national mechanisms to reinforce and ensure comprehensive and inclusive approaches to journalists' safety.

This year, representatives from the police, the public prosecution offices and the judiciary joined the discussions and explored ways on how to ensure a safe and conducive media environment, both online and offline, and to combat impunity for crimes against journalists and other media professionals in the region. In this light, particular emphasis was placed on strengthening the implementation of national legal frameworks for media by relevant public institutions, and the ever-increasing need for the OSCE participating States to fortify the commitments outlined in the OSCE Ministerial Council Decision on Safety of Journalists.

The conclusions presented in this report are based on the panel session discussions.

Session I: Opportunities and Challenges in Establishing an Efficient National Mechanism for Protection of Journalists – Serbia and the Netherlands Working Groups for Safety of Journalists

Establishing effective joint mechanisms at the national level showcases how strong collective efforts, involving all main actors, are key to ensuring a holistic and systematic response to the growing threats against journalists. Panellists in this session presented and discussed the mechanisms established in Serbia and the Netherlands for co-ordinated responses to threats and violence against journalists. Through the working groups in these two countries, the police, the prosecutor's office and media associations have developed innovative tools and measures to protect journalists from attacks and threats online and offline.

Panel conclusions:

- Strengthened co-operation amongst various stakeholders to develop effective national preventative and protective mechanisms in order to reinforce and ensure safety of journalists;

- The need for greater transparency of the joint work by the prosecution, police and journalists in the area of safety in order to enhance awareness and trust among the public and media community;
- The need for enhanced and inclusive sensitization efforts targeting law enforcement authorities and the public prosecution to raise awareness on the importance of journalism and media freedom related issues;
- The necessity for adjusting legal frameworks to cover all aspects of safety of journalists and their harmonized implementation by relevant authorities;
- Co-operation with social media networks in order to boost response efforts to threats and attacks against journalists online.

Session II: **Unifying National Databases, Analysis and Reporting on Attacks and Violence against Journalists**

Robust, harmonized and gender-responsive mechanisms for data collection, analysis and reporting on violations of journalists' safety are essential to ensure that prevention, protection and prosecution efforts are well informed and appropriately targeted. The panellists in this session exchanged current regional practices and good examples in the area of data management on safety of journalists, and explored ways in which existing data collection initiatives could be better harmonized and unified.

As a starting point in furthering data collection tools and mechanisms, participants stressed the need to strengthen communication and co-operation between journalists, law enforcement and the judiciary, to address any gaps, and thereby, ensure a safe working environment for media in the region.

Panel conclusions:

- The need to create and strengthen, where possible, harmonized and gender-responsive mechanisms for data collection, analysis and reporting on violations of journalists' safety;
- To establish and enhance regular communication and co-operation between journalists, media associations, law enforcement and the judiciary in order to create better safety nets and prevent attacks and impunity for crimes against journalists;
- The necessity to strengthen judicial follow-up by prosecutors in order to ensure that crimes against journalists do not go unpunished and unreported;
- To overcome the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic on journalists to properly report cases of attacks and pressure on media freedom and freedom of expression.

Session III: COVID-19's Impact on Media Freedom in the Western Balkans

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed major challenges to fundamental human rights with the introduction of restrictive measures affecting freedom of expression, freedom of the media and access to information. Panellists in this session discussed the difficulties presented by COVID-19 related restrictions on these core pillars of democracy.

While it was assessed that strong measures to fight the present health crisis were important, those directly affecting freedom of the media and freedom of expression added additional pressure on media and journalists to perform their important work during times of crisis. The participants and experts highlighted the shrinking media space and an ever-growing need to secure decent working conditions for journalists and other media professionals in order to enable a plurality of voices to flourish, and thereby, prevent disinformation. This is particularly crucial in times of crisis when the public most needs unhindered access to accurate, relevant and reliable information.

Panel conclusions:

- The need for greater financial support for local media and freelance journalists in order to ensure media sustainability, plurality of voices, and the free flow of information in the region;
- Enhanced self-regulation to ensure credible and reliable information instead of restrictive legislation in the fight against misinformation, disinformation and propaganda in times of crisis;
- Journalists and editors should revise ethical standards to synchronize with the realities of the present COVID-19 crisis, and enhance engagement of press councils to enforce and raise standards and ethics as a way to build trust in media in the region;
- Recognition of the imperative role that investigative journalists and media play in times of crisis and the importance of unhindered access to information;
- The need for independent commissions to ensure that financial support provided to the media does not translate into political interference;
- Encourage multi-stakeholder co-operation involving journalists, media organizations, academics and public officials to combat misinformation, pressure on the media and restrictions on access to information.

Session IV: Silencing Women Journalists - From Portraying to Online Harassment

Women journalists from the region shared their stories and experiences about the attacks and threats they endured while carrying out their journalistic work. They continue to be particularly targeted for harassment

and abuse online, not only for being a journalist but also due to their gender. Such a hostile environment has a detrimental impact, not only on their individual safety and wellbeing, but also on their journalistic work and the free flow of information. Female journalists often resort to self-censorship, while in many instances threats go unreported and/or unpunished.

In this session, panellists discussed the need for stronger actions to improve gender equality in society as an essential stepping-stone in enhancing the safety of women journalists in the media. In line with this, participants underscored the importance of mainstreaming a gender-responsive approach in existing and future mechanisms on the safety of journalists in the region. A preview of the OSCE RFoM's Resource Guide on Safety of Female Journalists Online was also presented during the session.

Panel conclusions:

- Enhanced understanding among different actors of the gender-specific threats and challenges female journalists face in order to raise awareness on the risks and improve protection of female journalists;
- The need for a comprehensive and inclusive dialogue with relevant State authorities to integrate a gender-responsive approach in the area of prevention, protection and prosecution against attacks and threats targeting female journalists both online and offline;
- Recognition of gender inequality in the media sector where the majority of senior level positions continue to be reserved for, and held by, men;
- Application of tailored training on gender-responsive approaches for all actors involved in the protection of journalists.

Welcome Remarks



Jürgen Heissel

Director, Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by wishing you all a very good morning. Normally, a conference like this would be opened by the Representative on Freedom of the Media. But in this case, where we are temporarily without one, I, as the Director of the Office, have the honour to welcome you to our seventh South East Europe Media Conference jointly hosted with the OSCE Mission to Serbia, in collaboration with OSCE field operations from this region.

Today, we should have all been meeting in Belgrade where this year's media conference was planned to take place. However, due to the present circumstances, the health risks and uncertainties, we are gathering in a different format. In order to be able to continue our important work even under these challenging circumstances we have decided to move our meeting online.

I am very pleased that we are joined today by a multitude of stakeholders from across the South East Europe region and beyond. Over 200 participants have already joined us online, including journalists, media associations as well as representatives from key public institutions involving law enforcement and the judiciary, regional and international experts, and civil society. More participants are also following our discussions on the livestream now running on the OSCE RFoM event page.

Let me take this opportunity to express particular thanks to our panellists and moderators for their readiness to share their expertise and steer our discussions.

Since our last regional conference held in Sarajevo a year ago, our Office has observed a persisting trend in threats to media freedom and the work of journalists across the region. Safety of journalists and media workers remains a growing and most challenging concern, particularly for female journalists who face additional threats of sexual violence, intimidation and gender discrimination, including in the online sphere.

The safety of journalists and the fight against impunity for attacks against journalists are paramount to safeguarding freedom of expression and ensuring a safe and enabling media environment. This is a commitment that all 57 OSCE participating States jointly pledged to uphold in the landmark OSCE Ministerial Council decision on Safety of Journalists adopted in 2018. This decision specifically urges participating States to:

“Take effective measures to end impunity for crimes committed against journalists, by ensuring accountability as a key element in preventing future attacks, including by ensuring that law enforcement agencies carry out swift, effective and impartial investigations into acts of violence and threats against journalists, in order to bring all those responsible to justice, and ensure that victims have access to appropriate remedies”

Alongside these challenges to journalists’ safety, this year has been marked in particular by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has not only amplified existing trends in the deterioration of media freedom, but also added new layers of challenges to freedom of expression, freedom of the media and access to information. This year’s conference aims to examine the impact of COVID-19 on media freedom, with a special focus on the safety of journalists as an imperative for a free, diverse and independent media.

Law enforcement agencies and the judiciary play a crucial role in protecting and ensuring a safe and conducive media environment, both online and offline, and in combating impunity for crimes against journalists and other media professionals. That is why we have chosen these topics for this year’s conference and why we have invited you, the representatives from the police and the public prosecution offices, to engage in our discussions. By working together through a multi-stakeholder approach, we can enhance the safety of journalists.

Your presence and the exchange of your experience and knowledge will contribute to a more sustainable and comprehensive solution to the challenges that independent investigative journalists and other media actors face in their important work.

We will delve into these topics in four sessions in the coming two days.

Our first panel, starting straight after our opening remarks, will look into the existing national mechanisms for co-ordinated responses to threats and violence against journalists, specifically those developed in Serbia and the Netherlands. In the case of Serbia, a Permanent Working Group for Safety of Journalists was established in 2017, comprised of representatives from the police, public prosecutor’s office, and seven media and journalist associations. As part of this initiative, a Contact Point System was created as a novel mechanism to facilitate reporting of, and access to information on, cases involving attacks against journalists. In a similar spirit, the Dutch law enforcement authorities and the media community established a working group in 2018 to jointly strengthen the position of journalists against violence and aggression. These examples can serve as reference models to replicate in other countries in the region. Discussions will thus focus on the opportunities and challenges in establishing national mechanisms to reinforce and ensure the safety of journalists.

The second panel will discuss in particular the commitment in the Ministerial Council Decision on Safety of Journalists to “*establish...national data collection, analysis and reporting on attacks and violence against journalists.*” Establishing robust, harmonized and gender-responsive mechanisms for data collection and reporting on violations of journalists’ safety is essential to ensure that prevention, protection and prosecution efforts are well informed and appropriately targeted. In this light, the second panel will provide an opportunity to exchange current regional practices and good examples in the area of data management on safety of journalists, and explore ways in which existing data collection initiatives could be harmonized and unified through a common set of criteria and standards.

Our third panel, taking place tomorrow morning, will examine in detail the impact of COVID-19 related measures on media freedom and freedom of expression in the South East Europe region through the lens of regional and international experts.

The present global pandemic is unprecedented and has posed fundamental challenges to democracy, with measures introduced that are impacting various fundamental human rights, including freedom of expression, freedom of the media and access to information. Over the past months, with the imposition of COVID-19 related restrictions and lockdowns, the media witnessed both a heightened public demand for information and an ever more impeded access to reliable data retained by public authorities. Together with the mandate holders on freedom of expression of the United Nations and the Organization of American States, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media issued a joint statement on 19 March, calling on governments to promote and protect access to and the free flow of information during the pandemic.

In particular, the statement recalls that: “*Human health depends not only on readily accessible health care. It also depends on access to accurate information about the nature of the threats and the means to protect oneself, one’s family, and one’s community*”.

And, by the same token: “*The right of access to information means that governments must be making exceptional efforts to protect the work of journalists. Journalism serves a crucial function at a moment of public health emergency, particularly when it aims to inform the public of critical information and monitors government actions.*”

Furthermore, the health crisis has had an adverse economic impact on the media sector, with a significant decline in newspaper circulation and advertising revenues. These developments have by all means exacerbated the level of media pluralism and access to sources of information at a time when the public most needed accurate, relevant and reliable information. In this view, the third panel will provide an opportunity to take stock of lessons learned by all stakeholders in creating a conducive media environment.

Tomorrow, in our fourth and final session, we will address the growing safety concerns that women journalists face online when doing their work, and the efforts by participating States to respond to online attacks against women journalists. The digital era has created new opportunities for journalists, but it has also provided a platform for new forms of attacks, particularly against women, not only for being a journalist, but also because of their gender. In the OSCE Ministerial Council Decision on Safety of Journalists, States recognized the distinct risks faced by female journalists in relation to their work, such as sexual harassment, abuse, intimidation, threats and violence, including through digital technologies.

The prevalence of gender-specific threats leads to a higher incidence of self-censorship among women journalists, while threats often go unreported and/or unpunished. This has a detrimental impact not only on their individual safety and access to justice, but also on their journalistic work and the free flow of information. A silenced journalist mutes the voices of the people who need them the most, and curbs society's right to a plurality of voices and information to make informed decisions. Tomorrow, we will hear chilling testimonies from female journalists from the region. These stories and experiences are a reminder of the specific situation and added burdens that women journalists face in today's digital age. They are also a sign that ever-stronger efforts are needed to tackle these prevailing issues.

In this regard, I am pleased to announce that our Office has developed a comprehensive resource guide on safety of female journalist online, a preview of which we have already shared with you, including three chapters that are relevant to tomorrow's discussions. The Resource Guide proposes points of action for different actors that can contribute to an enabling environment for the media. It is authored by Silvia Chocarro, who will be joining us for this session tomorrow, in co-operation with Sarah Clarke, Paulina Gutierrez and Judy Taing, and I would like to thank them for authoring this document.

The Resource Guide, which is due to be published in full this fall, aims to provide a concrete way forward for different stakeholders in reinforcing the safety of women journalists online by applying gender-responsive and holistic approaches. This last panel will be dedicated to exploring concrete actions on how to move from policy to practice through a multi-stakeholder approach, and will reflect on the national responses adopted so far as well as the recommendations presented in the forthcoming Resource Guide.

I hope that our discussions will prove to be a valuable contribution to improving the safety situation of journalists and freedom of the media in the region, in order to shape a more conducive media environment that is in line with the OSCE commitments on freedom of expression and free media.

I would like to thank all the respective State authorities from this region for supporting this conference as well as the OSCE participating States, the Netherlands and Bulgaria, for their generosity and interest in funding this conference.

Lastly, I would like to thank my team and the colleagues at the OSCE Mission to Serbia who have put all of this together.

Thank you for joining us and I wish us all a very productive and fruitful conference.

Inid Milo

Head OSCE Chairmanship TASK FORCE, Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania

I am pleased to be here this morning to participate, along with Ambassador Orizio and you dear Jürgen, in this conference on the very important topic of how we can work together to foster media freedom in South East Europe. The media freedom landscape of this region is pretty diverse and very dynamic; therefore addressing opportunities and challenges in ensuring a democratic media environment in compliance with OSCE commitments and other international norms remains a priority for all of us.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic triggered so many challenges for journalists, but also reaffirmed their mission as messengers of public information, transparency and hidden realities. The need for implementing the OSCE commitments on freedom of information and freedom of the media gained renewed relevance especially because of the pandemic, which exposed the vulnerable situation that journalists in the region are facing.

As Chairmanship-in-Office for 2020, Albania remains committed to supporting the central role that the OSCE plays in monitoring and supporting media freedom in our entire region. The second Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting, held in June this year in co-operation with the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM), aimed at, and hopefully succeeded in, effectively delivering on media freedom and safety of journalists and their resolute mission of informing the public, as well as in advocating for safeguarding peoples' human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Distinguished participants,

As a platform of exchange, today's conference is an opportunity to deepen the discussion on free media, access to information, online and offline, and exchanging best practices and expertise that the national law enforcement experts bring in protecting freedom of information and freedom of the media. Offering support to journalists in maximizing the quality and speed of information, especially in times of crisis, is a direct contribution to an independent, free and pluralistic media landscape. In this regard, protecting women journalists from the extra burden of being attacked and intimidated online remains an even bigger challenge to be addressed. Breaking the gender stereotypes in mass media is as important as providing a safe environment to the whole field of journalism. Addressing the hiatus that self-censorship may cause to free media due to gender is of paramount importance in challenging the lack of reporting on sensitive topics from women journalists.

Dear colleagues,

Before concluding, I would like to extend my deep appreciation to the organizers for the event, which I believe is a further reaffirmation of the vital role reporters play in ensuring the free flow of information in times of crisis and how other State structures contribute to their mission for real, free and timely reporting. As Albania, we are particularly delighted to share our information and expertise from the Director of the General Directorate State Police, Mr. Ardi Veliu.

As Chairmanship-in-Office for 2020, this conference may serve as a platform of exchange of expertise and experience that the participating States, with the collaboration of the RFoM, can benefit from in terms of providing support and assistance to one another.

H.E. Andrea Orizio

Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia

Dear Ms. Milo,
Dear Mr. Heissel,
Distinguished speakers and participants,

I am very pleased to have the opportunity, at the end of my tenure as Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia, to welcome you at this regional conference on tackling the threats to the safety of journalists, an issue of global and regional relevance that is very high on the agenda of our Organization.

I would like to thank our partners, the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and our sister OSCE field operations in South East Europe for their dedication and hard work during the last months in preparing this event. I also wish to thank all our international guests for joining us and offering their expertise for the benefit of the State authorities, media and citizens of the countries of the region that are represented here today. Under my leadership, the Mission to Serbia has been supporting the host country in its reform ambitions, working in partnership with domestic institutions and civil society and promoting their ownership of reform achievements. We have delivered assistance tailored to Serbia's needs and priorities by increasingly applying a cross-cutting approach and, especially on such occasions as today's conference, fostering regional co-operation.

I am also very grateful to all participants for acknowledging the idea underpinning this project and the substantial efforts that were jointly invested in the organization of this event, and of course for being with us over the next two days, which I expect to be thought-stimulating and fruitful.

If I recall how my colleagues and I imagined this conference when we started shaping it, I cannot help but note that the COVID-19 crisis has had a deep impact on its modalities. It is thus of utmost importance that, despite the very challenging circumstances caused by the pandemic, we have managed to find a way to keep alive a platform for multi-stakeholder dialogue on media freedom at the regional level.

Focusing now our attention on the Mission's endeavours in this field, I am convinced that our three-year long engagement in Serbia's Permanent Working Group for Safety of Journalists illustrates well the concrete impact that this kind of partnership can have. I would like to seize this opportunity to warmly thank the Republic Public Prosecutor's office, the Ministry of Interior and all the journalists and media associations who have worked with us in this process for their constant trust and willingness to co-operate.

The Working Group is a mechanism that allows these stakeholders to systematically verify that all attacks and threats are properly investigated, improving procedures if needed, and proposing protection measures when

necessary as well as implementing preventive action to reinforce the security of journalists. In addition, let me praise its members for their capability to adapt to the new health context and keep working remotely over the past few months.

Indeed, our joint efforts can serve as a model of professional and fruitful co-operation between State institutions, civil society and the international community. And the measure of our success is well illustrated by the fact that the law enforcement authorities and the media and journalists' associations have successfully taken ownership of the process we have jointly initiated.

I would like to point out now the most remarkable milestones of our co-operation:

- The Mission organized training sessions all over the country for a total of 229 representatives of law enforcement authorities and the media, who agreed on 26 recommendations on how to further improve the efficiency of this unique mechanism;
- The Mission's engagement in the dialogue between journalists and national authorities has contributed to increasing the mutual trust between law enforcement authorities and journalists. Above all, it helped raise awareness and the capacities of all parties about the legal framework and international standards on media freedom and journalists' safety;
- As a result of our joint work, the efficiency of investigations conducted by the police and the prosecution in cases threatening the safety of journalists has been significantly strengthened. This is best shown by the data made available by the Prosecutor's Office, according to which the number of perpetrators of crimes against journalists who have remained unidentified has dropped significantly since the Working Group was established: from 43 per cent in 2016, to 8 per cent in 2018 and 2019. Although not yet sufficient, this positive trend must be underlined and further supported.

The Mission's overall support towards a healthier media environment based on media freedom, the safety of journalists, ethics and professionalism, and media and digital literacy was reconfirmed by the facilitating role we played, upon invitation of the highest Serbian authorities, in the process of drafting the new Media Strategy. Following its adoption in January 2020, the Mission continued to provide its expertise and assistance for the development of the Strategy's Action Plan.

Despite the constraints caused by the pandemic, the Mission supported the development of the baseline Report for monitoring the progress in the implementation of the Media Strategy. The Report, that will be presented tomorrow, includes considerations about the threats to freedom of

information posed by the COVID-19 crisis that broke out soon after the adoption of the Media Strategy.

Based on the Mission's concrete experiences I have just touched upon, I have come to the conclusion that only together can we achieve more in terms of growth of media freedom in the region. Indeed, significant progress in the creation of the preconditions for improving safety of journalists can only be reached through a constructive dialogue involving all stakeholders, mutual understanding and permanent learning. This is one of the key messages we want to be heard during this conference.

Although this event predominantly gathers participants from South East Europe, the concern for safety of journalists is global. In fact, throughout the OSCE region, journalists are still threatened, attacked or even killed for their work. To address this problem, during the 2018 OSCE Ministerial Council held in Milan under the Italian Chairmanship, our 57 participating States adopted a Decision on Safety of Journalists.

This Decision is a major step forward, as it supports all journalists exposed to hardship and working in dangerous conditions. It calls on the participating States to fully implement all OSCE commitments and their international obligations related to freedom of expression and media freedom. This includes the fight against impunity for crimes against journalists.

By organizing this conference, we want to contribute to the implementation of this Decision and to support the participating States from the region in taking more effective measures to end impunity for crimes committed against journalists: relevant authorities are expected to promptly react against the threats that journalists and their families are facing. This would indirectly contribute to bolstering the public's trust in independent journalism and in turn foster democracy through unlocking the potential for an open public dialogue.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is still a lot of hard work ahead of us towards safe and free journalism. Those examples I mentioned before are not goals *per se*, but guaranteeing quality content in the public interest ultimately enables a meaningful democratic debate. All parties involved in this complex process should continue building their capacities, develop solidarity ties, and expand their knowledge to become even stronger guardians of journalism and freedom of expression. If our common aim is to end impunity for crimes committed against journalists, it is necessary to ensure accountability as a key element in preventing future attacks.

To conclude, I would like to restate that there are no strong democratic societies with weak media. To work for the development of trustworthy, free media is to work for one's own freedom in a democratic system. The OSCE

remains ready to assist all its partners in the region in their future reform endeavours. I believe your participation in this conference is an encouraging step leading us in that direction.

H.E. Jørn Eugene Gjelstad

Royal Norwegian Ambassador to Serbia

Dear Ambassador Orizio, Dear Ambassador Fabrizi,
Dear journalists and media experts,
Ladies and gentlemen,

As the Ambassador of Norway to Serbia, it is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to the second day of the Seventh OSCE South East Europe Media Conference “The New Frontline: Working Together to Foster Media”.

A vibrant, free and responsible press is the cornerstone of every democratic system. It is the right of every citizen to receive pluralistic information, which shapes public opinion on numerous topics that directly affect their lives and well-being. Citizens must be adequately informed if they are to participate actively in their society.

This is of particular importance in times of crisis, such as the one we are facing today – the pandemic health crisis with its grave economic and social implications. In this current situation, the media play an essential role and have a particular responsibility in providing accurate and reliable information on what is real, how we can best deal with this challenge collectively, and whether the authorities are up to the mark and act adequately.

In this specific context, such information is literally crucial to secure our health and safety. The free flow of news and information is more essential than ever, and ensuring an open dialogue and the exchange of vital information is key.

An independent, inclusive, responsible and educational press is one of the fundamental rights for any European consolidated democracy, regardless of whether it is an EU member, a candidate for membership or, like Norway, a practical but not a formal member. And at the operational level, the individual journalist stands out as the key professional with an almost strategic responsibility.

This person needs and requires the best possible working conditions.

Because the work of the individual journalist can save lives in the current pandemic emergency situation, by communicating factual information and in this way strengthening the alertness and preparedness of society as a whole.

This is why their physical and psychological safety should come first. Media organizations should make sure that journalists are trained on sanitary precautions and equipped with protective equipment. When sending journalists to report on the virus, their safety must be a priority.

And this is why the integrity of the individual journalist, the editors, the Board of the Media concerned as well as its owners is a matter of paramount importance. Objectivity, accuracy and factuality in media reporting has to be prioritized and ensured by all States in accordance with international standards on freedom of expression.

Because we should bear in mind that we are living in a time when we are witnessing increasing tendencies of dissemination of disinformation and distortion of news. This is often rooted in various political or economic interests, where the media is misused as a soft power instrument for various agendas.

Independent media is playing a central role in ensuring that citizens have access to reliable, accurate and updated news about important aspects of life, including the pandemic situation. In particular, at a time when citizens' fundamental rights are being limited or restricted due to required safety measures, journalists have an additional role to play as the key watchdog maintaining public scrutiny and debate on the adequacy of new measures put in place by the authorities.

All over the world, we have seen unfortunate examples of an "infodemic" in the pandemic's footsteps. This has required efforts in combating disinformation as well as misinformation campaigns in order to project factual information into the public space and strengthen our rational perception of what is really happening.

The 2020 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) underlines that the pandemic is exacerbating already existing threats to media freedom. Unfortunately, the 2020 edition shows "a clear correlation between suppression of media freedom in response to the coronavirus pandemic, and a country's ranking in that Index".

We are all saddened to learn about journalists who are threatened or silenced for criticizing the authorities. This is condemnable. We know that every act of harassment and violence that goes unpunished increases the odds of further acts of harassments and violence. All States must ensure that threats and attacks against journalists are not only investigated promptly, effectively and impartially, but that they also lead to final convictions. This is the only way to come to grips with this perverted malpractice.

To conclude:

Serious attacks on freedom of expression and freedom of the press can be seen worldwide since the beginning of the pandemic. We should not forget that these attacks represent serious attacks on democracy itself. And in the current situation where we fight an invisible epidemiological enemy, such attacks are just as much attacks on the public health and the safety of all of us.

I would like to thank you for organizing this conference and mobilizing key actors in the field. I wish you all fruitful discussions, and I look forward to continuing our dialogue and co-operation.

Keynote Speeches



Patrick Penninckx

Head of the Information Society Department, Council of Europe

Promoting Media Freedom in times of a pandemic

1. Trends in media freedom globally and in Europe

The European Convention on Human Rights turns 70 in November 2020. In 1950, the Convention's drafters could scarcely have believed that, with the power of the internet and social media, everyone could in effect become a "publisher" or that "podcasts and video blogs" produced in one country would be instantly accessible across borders to a global audience.

The technological transformation promised to facilitate freedom of expression and the enhancement of democratic freedoms.

Yet, what we are witnessing is – also – a growing threat to those who speak truth to power, including journalists. We also see an increasingly disengaged public that is losing trust in democratic institutions.

a. Safety of journalists

The level of pressure and violence against journalists is becoming worse. Journalists are directly attacked for their work in a hostile climate further inflamed by inflammatory rhetoric of senior politicians and others in positions of power.

In addition to attacks and threats, journalists also continue to be the target of aggressive, often arbitrary, legal cases against them. This can be just as stifling as physical violence. In 2019 alone, two journalists were killed, and 105 journalists remained imprisoned at the end of the year, according to the Council of Europe's Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists. The level of violence is becoming worse and this is unacceptable.

b. State interference with freedom of expression

Also, State interference with freedom of expression continues to compromise freedom of expression. In some areas, States have resorted to the ultimate restriction: they have blocked news and information websites, including Wikipedia, to hinder their citizens from receiving and imparting information on the internet.

Such regulation cannot be regarded as being compatible with human rights. However, human rights-compliant regulation also presents difficulties; it is a challenge for States today to ensure that their legislative and regulatory frameworks keep the pace with the fast-changing technologies that rule the media environment.

c. Media environment

This environment is just as difficult for the media themselves. The shift to digital has caused media advertising revenue to drop, with money being diverted to online platforms. In some countries, this has led to the monopolization of the media by a few large entities, whilst in others the media has become fragmented. In both cases, the media are becoming increasingly exposed to political or business interference, and employment conditions continue to worsen. Both factors place a strain on the quality of journalistic products.

Different, but no less serious, problems are challenging today's media users. The public, faced with an unprecedented volume of content, has increasing difficulty understanding what is true and whom to believe. Not to mention the tremendous increase in disinformation, especially during electoral periods. This causes confusion, creates a general pattern of "information disorder", and negatively affects society's trust in the media and in democratic institutions more broadly.

2. COVID-19

All these challenges were amplified by the outbreak of COVID-19. The media faced enormous demand for timely and accurate information on the pandemic. While striving to meet this demand, they have faced difficulties, ranging from restricted access to places and information, to a further reduced ability to generate revenue.

That said, the health crisis showed clearly that any efforts to contain the spread of the virus depended greatly on access to accurate and reliable information. Such information is crucial for our understanding of the situation, for our ability to make informed decisions, and can limit rumours and reduce the effect of disinformation, as well as improve the trust in measures taken to combat the crisis.

On the other hand, restrictions on free access to information – such as restricted travel or access to press conferences, and press credentials not being recognized – are more likely to erode public trust. This can also undermine the efficiency of crisis-response measures.

Further, it is undisputed that COVID-19 has been accompanied by a true infodemic – large-scale disinformation, some of which harmful to people's health and lives. Yet, hasty reactions and excessive restrictions on content that can be published are even more harmful. In this regard, it needs to be emphasized that an obligation to publish only official information is an excessive restriction of freedom of expression, even in an emergency situation. So too is arresting journalists because of their work on the frontline of the pandemic, and so are criminal sanctions imposed for exercising

journalistic activities. These have the gravest chilling effect on freedom of expression.

3. Council of Europe action to preserve and promote freedom of expression

In 2019, we have developed an implementation guide for the Committee of Ministers Recommendation on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors. The guide provides our member States with a set of good practices and a self-assessment tool for reviewing the implementation of the recommendation. We have also updated the online course on freedom of expression and prepared an entirely new course on the safety of journalists. These courses are training manuals and are designed to support the work of lawyers, judges, law enforcement and media across Europe.

Furthermore, a recommendation on the human rights impacts of algorithmic systems was adopted, providing guidance on how to develop and use algorithms in such a way that both human rights and innovation can thrive. Another recommendation, on promoting a favourable environment for quality journalism, is awaiting adoption. Furthermore, we are developing standards to address the impact of digital technologies on freedom of expression and its antithesis, hate speech, and to adapt media and communication governance to the challenges of the digital age.

In our standard-setting activities, our organization is consistently pursuing a multi-stakeholder approach and has benefited from a long and fruitful collaboration with other international organizations such as the OSCE. In addition to regular exchanges, for example those in the framework of Human Dimension Implementation Meetings, the office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media provides input to our organization's standard-setting instruments. With that, it helps to ensure a co-ordinated approach to international standards on freedom of expression.

Guy Berger

Director for Freedom of Expression and Media Development,
UNESCO

Journalism in the era of COVID-19

Executive summary:

To understand where we are, it is useful to unpack a bit what is new. This will in turn show that journalism is now within - not a “perfect storm” - but rather a “perfect hurricane”. Yet, there are also many positives, which can help us to shape a “new normal” for journalism and its contribution to society.

1. What's new:

There is a growing emergency about journalism. Before COVID-19, independent media was already an endangered species in many instances. News wastelands were growing. The impact of COVID-19 on societies has amplified this enormously. The virus kills people; and it is also killing journalism. Today, many are asking “Is this an extinction event?” – in other words, will we see more and more media outlets closing down and never coming back? And those which adapt and survive – at what price will that be to the integrity of journalism?

2. Inside the hurricane:

The economic woes of independent journalism have worsened. The viability of outlets is in a vice, due to collapsed advertising, disruption of distribution, impoverishment of many news consumers, and fatigue about the negative trends covered in the news. In many cases, editorial integrity is up for sale to whoever wants to buy it. There are vultures circling, seeking to buy up independent outlets for political reasons or in the hope that concentration and consolidation can yield fast returns – no matter the damage to newsroom size and quality. In the meantime, internet services – which already have the lion's share of advertising and audience time – have become stronger than ever.

As if this were not undermining enough for the news media, the pandemic has seen an increased use of iron fists against journalists, such as in reporting on protests,¹ as well as new repressive legislation about “fake news”,² as catalogued in two recent UNESCO reports. The weakening of media economics means it is harder for journalists and their outlets to push back effectively.

¹ <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-sounds-alarm-global-surge-attacks-against-journalists-covering-protests>

² https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco_covid_brief_en.pdf

It gets worse. Into this situation has come the tsunami of disinformation. This is not a side-show. It is a rampant rival to journalism. It converts internet companies into engines for lies that generate a fog of falsehoods, and it adds to the haze of hatred online. Additional recent publications by UNESCO make the point that disinformation is, by necessity, confrontational and adversarial.³ It has to discredit and displace information if it is to survive and thrive. Hence, so much of disinformation puts truth-tellers in its sights – scientists and of course journalists. And it hammers on cultural vulnerabilities, such as specially picking upon women journalists and others who are victims of stereotypes. All with real damage to the fight against COVID-19.⁴

The turmoil is compounded by reversals in access to information. Numerous governments have put the brakes on servicing the right to information,⁵ even as there are questions being asked about procurement processes under COVID-19 and the distribution of “rescue packages”. The instrumentalization of statistics about testing, infections, etc. has obscured rather than enlightened. Transparency is also lacking in regard to the internet companies who hold tight to their chests about how disinformation is spreading on their services and its accelerants, including the companies’ own attention-seeking algorithms. Transparency has never been more vital, and yet it seems to have barely improved since the start of the pandemic.

In all of this, the public is left cynical and confused. People are exposed to the legitimization of hate and/or intolerance of immigrants, critics, minorities and the press. There are mounting attacks on independent journalists by political actors and certain members of the public themselves. Media outlets themselves are often out of touch, and out of credibility.

At the same time, the pandemic has produced changes. Everyone today is more aware of global interdependence. They are aware of their right to health. They understand better the values of social solidarity. These are all features that can feed into a better public climate for journalism.

3. Pointing to positives:

In terms of media economics, the pandemic has shown that there can be greater demand for media services, and appreciation like #ThankAJournalist. This means that media has opportunity to win lost trust, if journalism re-orientes to address the real fears and hopes of the public. The pandemic has also brought home to journalists the need for advanced skills in order to stand out in the mass of content availed to people. We see signs that news is now covering not just true information, and not just digging into falsehoods and their sponsors, but also explicitly pointing out that there are areas of unknowns – such as can be found within in evolving science and in policy

³ https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco_covid_brief_en.pdf

⁴ <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/disinfodemic>

⁵ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374369>

debate. There has also been innovation in terms of fact-checking and resilience to hoaxes, and there are new models like membership that have shown their worth during these times. Finally, some emergency rescue packages have recognized the importance of journalism and there is another impetus to finding models to support journalism as a public good, drawing on public resources in ways that do not compromise professional standards and editorial integrity.

There have also been campaigns that recognize the importance of freedom of expression in times of emergency – enabling early warning of problems, sharing knowledge across boundaries, pushing duty-bearers into taking pre-emptive actions, and holding people accountable. The drastic step of internet shut-downs has been shown to be especially serious in these times. UNESCO’s “facts matter” campaign is premised on freedom of expression as not just a right but also a norm that is worth upholding.⁶ It is also likely that people today are more aware of the range of possibilities in terms of internet curation of content: it is not just a question of whether content is allowed online or taken down; it is a matter of what gets promoted or demoted, what can be shared without or with limits, what can reap advertising rewards, what can be labelled. These nuances are in principle helpful for dealing with content that in previous times attracted more binary restrictions or protections.

In addition, there is more understanding today about the phenomenon of media capture, and how to push back against it. The theme of this year’s World Press Freedom Day campaign – summarized as journalism without fear or favour – highlighted these issues and their adverse significance for dealing with the pandemic. UNESCO published a study on these, which is of great relevance to participating States in the OSCE region.⁷

It is also the case that journalists have emerged in many cases as heroes of counter-disinformation. The exposure of orchestrated campaigns with dishonest intent owes a huge debt to the work of journalists along with civil society. Again, it is the media that has called out internet companies for inadequate implementation of well-publicized commitments. Spreading knowledge and skill is another element that has grown in this period. The UNESCO handbook “Journalism, ‘fake news’ and disinformation” has been translated by volunteers into more than a dozen languages, with additional versions being prepared.⁸

Work continues to advance media relations with audiences in terms of support to press councils⁹ and the judiciary¹⁰, as well as in terms of

⁶ <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/communicationinformationresponse/visualresources>

⁷ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373572>

⁸ <https://en.unesco.org/fightfakenews>

⁹ <https://en.unesco.org/news/unescos-support-strengthens-sustainability-press-councils-south-east-europe>

¹⁰ <https://en.unesco.org/news/press-councils-and-judiciary-see-discuss-self-regulation-unesco-and-council-europe-meeting>

education ministries taking on board the importance of institutionalizing media and information literacy into curricula.¹¹

Finally, anniversaries like the 28 September International Day for Universal Access to Information¹² have been important in terms of advocating for improved proactive disclosure and data transparency during the pandemic.

4. *The New Normal: what will it be?*

As always, despite radical changes, old ways of behaving and seeing information as a threat continue. Ghosts of the past continue to haunt us, even if we have experienced the loss of much of our previous ways of being. And yet while old habits – including some bad ones – persist, there is a new jostling to shape the new. In this time of flux, norms and ideals are at stake. This opens doors to restore the status of independent media; to honour and value independent journalism; and to shame those who batter - or betray – it. In other words, the current times are a chance for journalism to hold out hope to humanity. This is why the 2021 World Press Freedom Day theme will be information as a public good, unpacked as the importance of securing the viability of media enterprises, transparency of internet companies, and capacity-building for audiences to use the information ecology for progress in all areas of sustainable development.

All this means that, rather than this being a time of terminal countdown, we can transform the crisis into a time of transition. With such an identity – that of active agents for building society back better than before – we can sustain the positive momentum.

¹¹ <https://en.unesco.org/news/international-experts-deliberate-draft-global-standards-curriculum-media-and-information>

¹² <https://en.unesco.org/commemorations/accesstoinformationday>

Session I: Opportunities and Challenges in Establishing an Efficient National Mechanism for Protection of Journalists – Serbia and the Netherlands Working Groups for Safety of Journalists



Branko Stamenković

Deputy Republic Public Prosecutor of the Republic of Serbia and
Member of the Permanent Working Group for Safety of Journalists

On 26 December 2016, the Republic Public Prosecution Office, together with the Ministry of Interior and seven journalist and media associations, signed the Agreement on Cooperation and Measures to Raise the Level of Safety of Journalists.

This Agreement aims at establishing a system of measures which will ensure more efficient legal protection for journalists. Accordingly, a permanent working group was established whose members are authorized high-level representatives of the contractual parties.

As envisaged by the Agreement, a mechanism of co-operation was established in such a way that each signatory party appoints people for contacting and co-ordinating procedures in cases of criminal offences that journalists can be subjected to.

The permanent working group conducted an analysis of the Criminal Code provisions and issued a Conclusion identifying 35 criminal offenses that could be committed to the detriment of journalists, in connection with the activities they perform.

In addition, a permanent working group is conducting an analysis of the ways of communication and the degree of openness of the State institutions towards the media and shall make recommendations for their improvement.

The agreement further provides that increasing the number of solved cases of criminal offences committed against journalists is urgent. The Republic Public Prosecution Instruction issued in December 2015 already determined this obligation. In line with that Instruction, all public prosecutions of regular jurisdiction make records on the criminal offences committed against journalists. Based on these records, the Republic Public Prosecution Office submits quarterly bulletins to all members of the Standing Working Group – information on the performance of the Public Prosecutor's Offices in relation to offences committed against journalists.

Furthermore, in co-operation with the OSCE Mission to Serbia, training courses of journalists, prosecutors and police officers were held. Meetings with contact points were also organized.

In accordance with the data available from the records, in the period from 1 January 2016 until 30 June 2020, criminal reports on 229 events (229 cases were formed) committed against journalists were filed with the Public

Prosecutor's Offices. The final decision was delivered in a total of 123 cases (53.71 per cent of all cases).

Regarding the cases where there is reasonable doubt that a criminal offence was committed which is prosecuted by the public prosecutor, out of 140 cases:

-In 29 cases (20.71 per cent) some form of criminal sanction has been imposed so far, or the criminal proceeding was transferred to another country;

-In 73 cases (52.15 per cent) evidentiary actions or investigations or MLA procedures are underway, or the main trial is before the competent court;

-In five cases (3.57 per cent) the court rejected/denied the indictment or acquitted the accused;

-In 33 cases (23.57 per cent) cases the potential perpetrator is unknown for the time being.

What is also important to emphasize is the decrease in the number of unknown perpetrators. While in 2016, a total of 22.81 per cent of perpetrators of criminal acts against journalists were not identified; there was no case of an unknown perpetrator in the first half of 2020.

Peter ter Velde

Security Coordinator of the Dutch Broadcasting Corporation NOS and of Press Safety, PersVeilig

The media sector, the police and the Prosecutor's Office are taking steps against violence and aggression against journalists. In this way, the various parties hope to reduce threats, violence and aggression. The media has drawn up a collective norm. This means that journalists always file a complaint with the police when something happens within the norm. The parties involved within PersVeilig underline the importance of this collective norm to make it known that such behaviour is unacceptable and that action will be taken.

Employers

Employers in the media sector are responsible for the safety, health and well-being of the journalists working for them. This means that employers ensure sufficient preparatory time and preventive measures, such as effective training, for any form of reporting or publication that may involve risks to the safety of the journalist. A training budget is therefore included in the collective labor agreement, which is earmarked for this purpose. In addition, the employer ensures that the company itself is also prepared for threats. The document "Dutch Media Security Plan" by PersVeilig is provided for this purpose.

In the case of safety incidents, the employer stands next to the employee or freelancer. Full support is required. The experiences against the journalist can be traumatic. The employer provides psychological and social assistance.

The employer files a complaint instead of the journalist. After unpleasant incidents, this may be part of the employer's duty of care. In addition, the address of the employer is then included in the police documents, which offers extra protection to the journalist.

Journalists

Journalists attend training courses that the employer offers, and will act in accordance with the responsibilities set out in the "Dutch Media Security Plan". For freelancers without a client, training courses will be offered by, or via, PersVeilig.

For journalists, it is of the utmost importance that all incidents are reported to the employer and to the PersVeilig hotline. The employer then has the responsibility to support the journalist in the next steps. For freelancers, they

report incidents to their regular client. Freelancers without a client can go to the PersVeilig hotline.

Law enforcement

Journalists have been given a preferential position with the police. This means that a special regime applies to journalists. The profession receives a separate check mark in the file. It means that journalists who file a complaint make themselves known as a journalist. The police and the Prosecutor's Office subsequently give high priority to the investigation and prosecution of the suspects of aggression and violence against journalists. Journalists have been given the same legal status as employees with a public function (similar to police officers, firefighters, teachers, etc.). The preferential position only applies if the offence is related to the performance of the position of journalist. Violence and aggression against the journalist as a private person does not lead to a preferential position, unless the threat occurs in the private sphere with the aim of having the journalist report differently than he/she would under normal circumstances.

Toni Angelovski

Assistant Minister for Public Relations, Ministry of Interior, North Macedonia

Dear colleagues,

I am honoured to address you today and participate in a discussion on the safety of journalists. I am especially proud to say that, in the last few years in the Republic of North Macedonia, we have made great progress in this field, especially since before 2017, when journalists were a frequent target of thugs and the police, with most attacks remaining unresolved and the perpetrators going unpunished. Since then, we have reached a situation where attacks on journalists are a real rarity, which, of course, required political will and a lot of work.

I would also like to emphasize the role of the OSCE Mission to Skopje and the Association of Journalists of Macedonia, with whom we have worked in partnership in this field in recent years, creating a result that we, as the Ministry of Interior, are proud of, and for which we have recognition from journalists and journalistic organizations. This progress was also noted in the report of the European Commission, which we are especially proud of. Of course, we can always do better and we will continue to work in this field in the future.

After the change in government in 2017 and the democratization of the country, the period when anyone could attack and intimidate journalists came to an end. Moreover, after the arrival of Mr. Oliver Spasovski as the head of the Ministry of Interior, it was made clear that any threat to the work of journalists would not be tolerated and that if anyone dared to attack a journalist, he/she will be held responsible for that. The facts show that, since then, with the Ministry of Interior under the leadership of Mr. Oliver Spasovski, there has not been a single unsolved case of a physical attack on a journalist. Such an attitude contributed to a drastic reduction in the number of attacks, which have been reduced to a minimum. Unfortunately, in the first half of 2020, in the period of the so-called technical government when the Ministry of Interior was under the leadership of the party that was in power before 2017, we witnessed a slight deterioration, but now things are back to normal and we are continuing in the right direction.

It took a lot of effort to achieve such results. At the beginning, we completely opened the Ministry of Interior to journalists, and signed a memorandum of co-operation with the Association of Journalists. With our joint work and co-operation we are seeking to improve the situation.

As Assistant Minister of Public Relations, I was appointed as the person in charge of responding immediately to any problems that journalists may have.

This includes overcoming the problems of where and when media workers can record articles/news, because in the previous period journalists and police saw each other as enemies. I am also responsible for reporting physical attacks on journalists.

In co-operation with the OSCE Mission to Skopje and the Association of Journalists of Macedonia, we have developed a “Guidebook on safety of journalists while reporting during critical events” in order to drastically and qualitatively improve the smooth and safe performance of the journalistic profession. The guidebook is primarily intended to identify risks and avoid attacks on journalists, especially when they are reporting on high-risk events. It also aims to clarify the procedures and legal competencies of the Ministry of Interior and the Public Prosecutor’s Office in order to provide greater protection to journalists.

The development of this guidebook was preceded by six workshops on “Safety of journalists while reporting during critical events, freedom of expression and improving communication between journalists and the police”. These workshops were attended by journalists, photo reporters, as well as members of the Ministry of Interior, who shared their experience and located points where it is necessary to improve co-operation. These workshops contributed substantially to getting to know each other and overcoming the barriers between journalists and the police.

One of the primary tasks and duties of the institutions of the system, more precisely of those which have been given a mandate to rule, is to constantly work on creating a quality environment for achieving all the conditions important for the functioning of the media, and to communicate and co-operate with the media. There is a common interest and benefit in doing so for the media, journalists, institutions, the public and citizens. Consequently, we are directed to each other, obliged to continuously build co-operation, relations and communication that will produce quality and accurate reporting, and more precisely loudness in our institutional functioning, which will provide even greater security and smooth conditions to practice journalism, without threats, violence, or any obstacles that would be a problem for any medium or journalist.

We, as the Ministry of Interior, together with our partners, will continue to work in this field in the future in order to achieve even better results.

Session II: Unifying National Databases, Analysis and Reporting on Attacks and Violence against Journalists



Snezana Trpevska

President, Research Institute on Social Development, North Macedonia

Western Balkan's Regional Platform for Advocating Media Freedom and Journalists' Safety: Categorization of threats and attacks on journalists

(1) Western Balkans Regional Platform

In 2016, with the support of the European Commission, the journalists' associations from five Western Balkan countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo (UNSC1244) and Serbia) established a cross-country mechanism for monitoring and advocating for media freedom and journalists' safety at the local, national and regional level.

For this purpose, a set of reliable and comparable indicators was developed in 2016, as a common Methodology. The Methodology consists of three groups of indicators.

The main purpose of this document was to provide national journalists' associations (NJAs) with simple, comprehensible and coherent methodological guidelines on the basis of which the first "baseline" research study was conducted in 2016 and successive research reports in 2017, 2018 and 2019.

In the new cycle – 2020, 2021 and 2022 – two more countries joined the Platform: Albania and Croatia.

The gathered research data was used over the past years for initiating numerous advocacy actions – either at national or at regional level: initiatives for amending legislation, awareness-raising campaigns, published alerts, press releases or articles about violations of media freedoms and journalists' rights.

(2) Journalists' Safety Indicators

The indicators in the third group, which is related to the safety of journalists, consists of three main categories:

C.1. Safety and Impunity Statistics –the statistical data collected by the journalists' associations according to the categorization of various types of non-physical and physical attacks on journalists; all the threats and attacks registered by the journalist associations are published on the joint platform. <https://safejournalists.net/>. It is an Online Platform for Immediate Reporting of Attacks on Journalists and Violations of their Rights. In addition to the possibility of reporting attacks and providing support to journalists, the Platform contains a single database of attacks on journalists since 2014, as

well as data on public actions, analyses, and advocacy activities of partners and other media organizations.

C.2. State institutions' and political actors' behaviour concerning journalists' protection. This indicator answers the question: Do State institutions and political actors take responsibility for the protection of journalists?

C.3. The criminal and civil justice system's behaviour concerning threats and acts of violence against journalists. This indicator answers the question: Does the criminal and justice system undertake efficient measures and actions to investigate, prosecute and sanction the instigators and perpetrators of the acts of violence against journalists?

Note: This group of indicators is developed mainly by using the UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: National level, but adapted over the years to the specific situation of the Western Balkan countries.

(3) Safety and Impunity Statistics – Categorization

Categories	Description
Non-physical threats and harassments	The non-physical threats and harassments include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - surveillance or trailing; - harassing phone calls; - arbitrary judicial or administrative harassment; - aggressive declarations by public officials; - other forms of pressure that can jeopardize the safety of journalists in pursuing their work. These types of threats <u>do not</u> include mobbing and bullying in the working environment.
Threats against the lives and physical safety of journalists	These may include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - references to killing journalists, journalists' friends, family or sources; - references to making physical harm against journalists, journalists' friends, family or sources. These threats may be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - made directly or via third-parties; - conveyed via electronic or face-to-face communications; - may be implicit as well as explicit.
Actual attacks on journalists	Types of actual attacks may include actual physical or mental harm, kidnapping, invasion of home/office, seized equipment, arbitrary detention, failed assassination attempts, etc.
Killings of journalists (in the past 15-20 years)	Types of killings may include being killed in the cross-fire, assassinated, killed in a bomb explosion, beaten to death, etc.

Threats and attacks on media institutions, organizations, media and journalists' associations	Actual attacks on property of media outlets and organizations, their personnel, seized equipment, aggressive declarations by public officials etc. Also, threats and attacks might include some of the categories listed above.
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Sanela Gorušanović-Butigan

Vice President, High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Attacks on Journalists and their Safety

Freedom of thought and expression are fundamental freedoms of every human being. They are essential for individual dignity and fulfillment. Above all, they are imperative building blocks of democracy, the rule of law, peace, stability and sustainable, inclusive development.

Freedom of expression as the basis of a democratic society is guaranteed through Article 19 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and other international documents promoting human rights and freedoms.

Compliance, or non-compliance, with the provisions and regulations of these documents can be specifically reflected in media activities, which play a significant role in a democratic process overall as well as in building a democratic society.

Unfortunately, freedom of speech and safety of journalists in recent years are most often discussed in the context of their endangerment and the need for greater protection.

Journalists and other media actors around the world face threats, censorship, political and economic pressure, intimidation, abuse of defamation laws and ultimately physical attacks that endanger their lives.

The situation of the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not reassuring. Journalists and other media workers are exposed to political pressure, intimidation, and physical attacks on a daily basis, along with inadequate working conditions, non-transparent ownership and an underdeveloped market that favours media clientelism. Such working conditions, media activities and reporting directly reflect on citizens, whose views are often based precisely on the information received through the media.

Freedom of reporting in Bosnia and Herzegovina has further deteriorated during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, when media reporting was supposed to be the most important source of information for citizens, Bosnia and Herzegovina failed to respond to this obligation, as pressure on the media became a regular pattern. During 2019 and 2020, more than 45 different forms of violations of the right to freedom of expression and attacks on journalists were recorded, which is an increase compared to previous years. This is a clear indication that the State and all competent authorities should be more actively engaged in protecting the rights of journalists and ensuring their uninterrupted work.

Violence, harassment and intimidation of journalists are an attack on democracy itself. They stifle media freedom and freedom of expression, depriving citizens of the right to make decisions based on critical thinking of timely and truthful media information. Journalists cannot be independent, nor can their work be based on free reporting, if they do not have safe working conditions. Safety of the media is one of the basic preconditions for the existence of free media.

Guaranteeing freedom of expression is a precondition for progress on the path to the European Union (EU). Our common goal should therefore be to fight for a democratic life that will enable journalists to work without fear of censorship, loss of workplace, intimidation and, most importantly, without fear for one's life.

Bosnian legislation guarantees the highest level of human rights and freedoms, including the right to freedom of expression, but the challenge lies in its inconsistent application. Therefore, the primary task should be to remove obstacles that lead to the inadequate implementation of legislation.

The fact is that the police and prosecutors have a key role in preventing violence against journalists. We must work on strengthening the capacity of the police, investigative bodies and courts in processing attacks on journalists, for instance by improving technical and human capacities to sanction perpetrators of threats and attacks on journalists, which also leads to strengthening public confidence in these institutions.

With the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Access to Information at the State level, positive progress has been made in the field of the right to access official documents and information. When it comes to this law, we should promote the practices of public bodies to provide insight into information in their possession as soon as possible, especially when the applicants are journalists. Such practices should be promoted not only as a way of respecting the law, but also as a way of improving the reputation of these public bodies in the eye of the public.

Simultaneously, it is necessary to work on improving criminal legislation and ensuring that attacks on journalists are treated as an attack on an official, as this way the judiciary would be obliged to prosecute any assault on, or threat to, the right to freedom of expression.

Given that freedom of the media is a key element of the rule of law and an important driver of the democratic, transformational process, the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a regulatory body of the judicial system, is ready to contribute to establishing effective State mechanisms to protect journalists, in co-operation with all key bodies.

Ardi Veliu

Director of the General Directorate State Police, Albania

Honourable Jürgen Heissel, Director of the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media,

Honourable Gordana Janković, Head of Media at the OSCE Mission to Serbia,

Distinguished representatives of law enforcement institutions and the media,

Please let me first thank you for the invitation and express my gratitude that I am part of this very important conference. I am grateful to have the opportunity to express my opinion and that of the institution I lead on the importance of media freedom and the work we have done, and are doing, to provide journalists, first of all, with access to the right to information, the transparency of our work, as well as the support and legal protection of the police when they feel threatened or harmed because of their work.

This conference, which is taking place online due to COVID-19, has a special importance in the overall development of the integration of society and institutions, as the media is one of the most important pillars. It is irreplaceable in a democratic country, because it directly affects the promotion and acceleration of processes in the interest of citizens.

It is an undeniable and inalienable fact that information has been, and remains, the basis of human communication. In this context, the media and communication technologies have already become a powerful basis for the existence of humanity itself.

Freedom of thought, expression and information are rights that are guaranteed and protected by law. These rights are fundamental to ensuring that citizens are informed; learn about important processes that affect their lives; and to oblige the institutions to be accountable to taxpayers and citizens.

In my opinion, as Albanian State Police General Director, journalists' reporting on police work is the best cure for shortcomings and mistakes. Ensuring media freedom is key to promoting and developing democracy in social life and the economic development of the country.

Distinguished representatives of law enforcement agencies, distinguished organizers of this conference,

The Albanian State Police is fully committed to co-operating with the media. In this context, there is an office of Police Spokesperson and Information Coordinator in all Local Police Directorates and in the General Directorate of

State Police, which not only provides information in a timely and truthful manner to the media, but also informs the public.

We are committed to giving legal protection to journalists, and reacting immediately in those cases when journalists are violated while performing a noble task, that of informing the public with the truth.

In this context, the State Police has identified (backed up with evidence) and referred to the Prosecution Office all reports made by field journalists, analysts or media owners, and has worked in co-operation with the respective Prosecution Offices by regions, to detect, document and bring to justice their perpetrators.

The State Police has not prosecuted any journalist who has made an unfair and untrue report on the work of the police or has slandered and denigrated police officers for the close interests of various persons.

In the case of natural disasters, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, we have tried to help the media by being by their side, and not using the pandemic as a justification for imposing restrictive measures and avoiding requests for information. On the contrary, we have found appropriate forms of co-operation that are in the interest of informing citizens.

The Albanian State Police remains committed and focused on guaranteeing order and security for the citizens, on creating a safer social environment, where all factors and actors can safely carry out their activities, as well as determined to protect of fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens. In this context, journalists have been, are, and always will be the primary focus in our work in terms of providing co-operation, transparency and legal protection.

Pursuant to the purpose of this conference, without question there is a need for national databases on cases, analyses and reports on attacks and violence against journalists.

In addition, better co-ordination of actions, including their follow-up, by all law enforcement agencies is also needed, so that any case of violation of a journalist's safety due to their work receives a legal response from law enforcement institutions.

Ana Bošković

State Prosecutor in the Basic State Prosecutor's Office,
Montenegro

Distinguished colleagues,

At the outset, I wish to thank the organizers for the opportunity to participate in this panel and share the experience in Montenegro regarding the reporting on cases of attacks against journalists and their property.

As you can see in my short presentation, I am a State Prosecutor and, among other things, I am in charge of reporting on cases of attacks against journalists and their property in Montenegro.

The world today largely relies on the media and the messages they transmit. The media have a crucial role in the freedom of expression and the sharing of information. Bearing in mind such a significant role, it is clear that attempts occur, around the world, to put the media under the control of certain persons or groups (powerful politically, economically or religiously). Unfortunately, threats against journalists do happen, including their murders, because of the job they perform.

With a view to their protection, and for the sake of the protection of the freedom of expression, the international community delivered numerous documents obliging all democratic States to respect freedom of thought and expression as well as the protection of the physical and psychological integrity of journalists.

At the global level, as well as at the national one, there are authorities and organizations engaged in monitoring and assessing the level of respect for the right to freedom of expression and freedom to inform, in individual States. These organizations are in charge of monitoring the work of State institutions, but they exist also to remind us that the freedom of media, *inter alia*, depends on efficient investigations, processing, and punishment of those jeopardizing media freedom by attacking journalists.

I wish to emphasize that, as far as the reporting on the attacks of journalists and their property is concerned, the State Prosecutor's Office submits reports on these cases regularly, to both national and international organizations. I would like to point to only some of the reports we submit:

-With a view to fighting impunity in cases of criminal offences against journalists and their property, the Supreme State Prosecutor provided instructions, in early 2018, to all Prosecutor Offices, pointing to their commitment to act timely and efficiently in all cases of attacks of journalists and their property, and to report back to him regularly on the results of these cases.

-The Commission for monitoring the activities of competent authorities in the investigation of threats and violence against journalists, murders of journalists and attacks against media property, was established in Montenegro. The Commission regularly obtains information on cases relevant to its work.

-The Working Group for Negotiating Chapter 23 – Judiciary and Fundamental Rights. This group prepared the table of the track record used to inform the European Commission, twice a year, on all cases of attacks of journalists and their property, as well as on cases that occurred during the reporting period. Examples of this include the murder of journalists from 2004 and the attempted murders of journalists in 2007 and 2018.

-Regular reporting to the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, including on journalists' safety. The reports are delivered through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Permanent Mission of Montenegro to the OSCE.

-Reporting to the Council of Europe Platform for journalists' safety, which publishes cases of attacks against journalists and threats made against them.

With regards to the reporting on cases in which journalists are the affected party, I must use this opportunity to point to the benefits of such reports but also to the challenges we face.

The benefits gained through such monitoring and reporting include:

- Raising awareness of the necessity to protect journalists;
- Warning and sanction for states not achieving the adequate results in protection of journalists and investigation of attacks against them and their property;
- Emphasising the significance of media freedom.

The challenges we face include:

- Finding the balance in providing adequate information by not jeopardizing the interest of the investigation at the same time;
- Explaining that, at certain times, incomplete information is provided only to protect the interests of the case, and is by no means aimed at concealing the work of the investigating authorities.

However, the challenges we face must not be an excuse to not deliver information but instead to find the right balance through co-operation and the exchange of experiences.

I do hope that today's discussion will result in certain guidelines aimed at improving the collection and processing of information.

Session III: COVID-19's Impact on Media Freedom in the Western Balkans



Mogens Blicher Bjerregård

President, European Federation of Journalists

The OSCE, the media and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a lot of challenges for journalists and press freedom:

- The financial crisis for the media has increased in many countries; journalists have lost jobs and freelancers in particular have difficulties in continuing to make a living out of their job. It was difficult enough before. The closure of media outlets has had a negative impact on press freedom. Therefore, the EFJ has shared best practices and ideas from a variety of recovery plans in different countries.
- New legislations and restrictions also often harm journalism, and in some countries it simply added to the existing attacks on press freedom as we have seen, for example, in Hungary.
- Violations, both verbal and physical, have increased. Thanks to the monitoring of the International Press Institute, we in Europe have recorded 107 such cases related to COVID-19. This is something we should evaluate. We have examples of everything from death threats against a journalist in Chechnya to smear campaigns in Serbia.

It is extremely important that we find mechanisms to address this situation, because globally, the COVID-19 crisis has shown the importance of free and professional media. We have witnessed the viral spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories. We therefore need more accuracy, fairness, reliability and ethics, which requires facts more than opinions. We must give space to experts and digest scientific language in understandable terms.

So we need professional journalists to balance:

- The official information about how to tackle COVID-19, not only information from the authorities, but also from scientists;
- And to maintain critical journalism on the approach we see from governments and from the industry involved.

It is significant that in some countries – including my own, Denmark – citizens have increased their use of professional media outlets and in a few cases there have even been positive developments for business models of private media. We should now use this opportunity to make a broad survey across Europe to assess changes in the use of media during a crisis like this.

For States and the authorities it is crucial to have reliable and credible media to make sure that they can reach out to citizens with their messages.

For citizens, it is crucial that they can rely on credible media, and that also demands a pluralistic media landscape.

For media to be able to fulfil their role, press freedom must be respected, this includes:

- The right to go beyond borders;
- Access to information;
- Support for a pluralistic media landscape.

Looking at these three elements, there have been violations. Restrictions have created new borders for citizens and journalists; journalists have been pushed away from reporting on e.g., lack of protective equipment, and have been accused of having violated restrictions when reporting. We have examples of journalists being threatened, fined and detained when trying to deliver true and crucial information to citizens.

Regarding access to information, deadlines for authorities to deliver on requests have been extended or simply violated. One of the reasons to have legislation on the right to information is that citizens, in critical situations like the COVID-19 crisis, should have easy access to all relevant information, and journalists are acting on behalf of citizens.

Pluralism in the media is the best way to ensure more impartial journalism. To reach out to citizens during a crisis like COVID-19, we must have media on all platforms, national, regional and local, and with different approaches. And it is important that all those media get access to press conferences, documents etc.

What can we do?

First: We should make a European assessment, specifically research on how media have been treated, the impact – both positive and negative – of the crisis.

Second: Representatives of the media, journalists, academics and politicians should establish a working group to make recommendations for how to make sure that free and independent journalism can play its role as a public good. We need to be together, because those who either are, or are considered to be, part of the problem must also be part of the solution.

Third: We should strengthen media and information literacy. It is crucial that we, as journalists, take part in this – not only in the educational system but more broadly with citizens. The competition between professional media and social media has to be addressed, so that we can all be there, each of us playing our role in the best possible way.

Fourth: Understand that only self-regulation can ensure free and independent media. This of course also means that we, as journalists and editors, should have a new round regarding our ethical standards to assess if

they apply to a crisis such as COVID-19, or if we need some changes. Also, we need to address how our press or media councils should be able to do their job.

Fifth: We must empower our profession because credible, reliable professional journalism is the best way to counter propaganda, disinformation and misinformation. It also shows that we need new formats in journalism, more data journalism, podcasts and more engagement with the readers, listeners and viewers, which demands support for local journalism. All of this also includes decent working conditions.

Saša Mirković

Lecturer, University Singidunum, The School for Media and Communication, Serbia

The impact of COVID-19 on Serbian media freedom during the state of emergency

The two-month long state of emergency, combined with the aggravation of the business environment and financial problems, has already shown its delayed, negative impact on the Serbian media scene. This justifies the fear that these discouraging trends could lead to a further fall in the media freedom index based on which Serbia is currently ranked 93rd in the Press Freedom Index report compiled by Reporters Without Borders. This negative spiral presents a major challenge in commencing the practical application of the Government's new Media Strategy, which had no way of anticipating all the problems that come with a global pandemic.

No state of emergency should be a springboard for non-constitutional infringements of human rights; rather, it should be a short-term necessity to which, just like in the case of a curfew, one resorts due to the ineffectiveness of daily procedures and normal mechanisms. In such circumstances, media freedom could easily come under threat. Even though government representatives, regulatory bodies, and independent institutions formally denied any alleged restrictions of the freedom of expression at the beginning of the state of emergency, the fact remains that a number of events were witnessed during the state of emergency that proved them wrong. Also, a large problem was presented by the "infodemic" (this term was used to describe the role played by tabloids), which "biologically harm readers since they disregard the facts and refer to false indications". This assessment was made, among other things, based on the impermissible publication of details from medical records, because of which the media and journalists' organizations issued a joint statement condemning such behaviour as it contravened professional standards and the Code of Serbian Journalists.

Representatives of the highest State authorities positively assessed the operation of most media outlets during first two weeks of the state of emergency. Specifically, they argued that the public needs to be informed about everything since this was one of the ways of preventing the further spread of the virus. Only two days following this assessment, the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted a conclusion about information during the pandemic which, besides the centralization of public information about the coronavirus pandemic during the state of emergency, also outlined that the public would be provided with information from the Prime Minister or a person duly authorized by the Crisis Response Team. This rigid and unnecessary decision was met with undivided criticism from local and international experts in the field, and led to the prompt withdrawal of said Conclusion, which, as the Prime Minister explained, took place because the President asked for it since he believed that the Information

Decree was a mistake. Nevertheless, the fact remains that this attempt to control the media was deemed to be a bad move by the Serbian Government in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This was followed by a scandalous incident with Ana Lalić, a Nova S portal journalist, who wrote about the situation in the Clinical Centre of Vojvodina. The authorities apprehended her, searched her home, and later released her from detention. This behaviour by government representatives attracted international attention and ignited the reaction of a number of different institutions, which was followed by the highest government representatives saying that it was a mistake to keep the journalist in detention. The Chief Public Prosecutors' Office in Novi Sad subsequently rejected the criminal charges made against Ana Lalić for the criminal offence of causing panic and disorder as referred to in the Criminal Code. This case was one of the examples of a negative campaign, which some tabloids and government representatives led against the media outlets that were conscientiously doing their job during the state of emergency. Attaching a *tycoon*, *anti-government* or *opposition* label to those media houses became a common narrative of government representatives.

Pro-government media drew attention to the principal problems of the local media scene, which were in existence before the state of emergency was introduced but which intensified after it was cancelled. Double standards were also present in the treatment of local media houses and journalists in several larger towns in Serbia, because the news about the infected and deceased in those towns could be heard and seen exclusively on Radio-televizija Srbije and the pro-government Pink TV station.

The need to reduce the number of persons present at “medical” press conferences contributed to the Serbian Government deciding that conferences were to be transmitted exclusively by RTS, and that their TV signal was to be transmitted by interested TV stations whose journalists were still allowed to attend daily media briefings. This was a prelude to the government's decision to deny journalists access to daily press conferences (due to the alleged spread of the virus) and to leave them with the option to pose questions by mail. This baffling decision was seen as the government's attempt to prevent the wider public from understanding that there is a difference between the questions asked by pro-government media and those asked by the media who are doing their job professionally, and from distinguishing between the media houses which promote public interest and those which promote the interest of a political party. The dubious manner in which these press conferences were organized – which was met with condemnation – and the unclear selection criteria on which the questions were sent, contributed to a situation where increasingly more media houses ceased to send questions to the Crisis Response Team. Instead of serving the purpose of informing a wide audience, the subsequent reversal to the former format of press conferences was abused by representatives of conflicting media who denounced and trash-talked each other “live” on TV.

The above examples clearly show why the importance of media pluralism, freedom of opinion, and accessibility of relevant information was justifiably emphasized during the state of emergency. Although the impact was certainly the greatest on public media service, the information cable channels, web portals, news agencies, digital platforms and social networks also gained in importance. It is increasingly more obvious that print media are losing this battle, and the reasons lie in information becoming more accessible via new technologies, the restriction of movement, and impaired distribution and sale of print issues. The state of emergency made it necessary for most media houses to reorganize the way they operate. Namely, it was then that they faced a growing number of problems and crises, which were deepened further by decreased consumption, absence of marketing budgets, and considerably lower incomes from sales. All of these factors are adversely affecting the local media market, which was already on its knees. There can therefore be no doubt that the global pandemic will have an indirect effect on the existing social and trade union rights of media professionals.

All the above mentioned factors have led to Serbia being, according to research by Reporters Without Borders, included in the group of 90 countries (out of 193 members of the United Nations) in which media rights infringements were registered in reporting about COVID-19. This same organization included journalist Ana Lalić among the “information heroes” from the ranks of media, whistle-blowers, and journalists who “through their work contributed to saving of lives, in some cases with serious consequences for themselves.”

Similar consequences were suffered by all investigative journalists, portals, and media, which, even after the state of emergency was cancelled, continued to inform the general public about dramatic insights of public interest. Radical reactions of the government offered further proof that the actual state of affairs was being concealed, which produced fear and distrust among the population with regard to the measures imposed by the Crisis Response Team. This is yet another example of the deferred effect of whatever was happening during the state of emergency and curfew when some new narratives and unwritten rules were introduced. All this rightfully causes discomfort and concern regarding the degree of media freedom, which should not be below the standards reached before the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Marina Tuneva

Executive Director, Council of Media Ethics, North Macedonia

The coronavirus pandemic has, in addition to changing our way of life and restricting freedom of movement, affected media reporting. Journalists and media workers were forced to adapt to restrictive measures. They faced the difficult task of balancing between the duty to tell the truth and the obligation to not incite unnecessary public anxiety.

At the onset of the crisis, newsrooms were not prepared to work in a pandemic. Some of the challenges included lack of prior practice, lack of proper equipment, economic pressure, risk of restrictive measures and other regulations.

Journalists and media workers feared for their job security, safety and existence in general. There were no massive job losses, however there was a significant reduction in salaries due to the collapse of advertising revenues in the media. Two media workers died of COVID-19, and there have been cases of journalists being infected with the coronavirus.

The pandemic forced the media to resort to new technologies and ways of reporting. This had both a positive and a negative impact. Journalists encountered restrictions in accessing certain information. As far as sources of information or interlocutors were concerned, institutions were not as readily available as before the pandemic, unlike others, such as experts and analysts, who were now more accessible due to the use of new technology. At online press conferences, there was insufficient direct interaction with public officials, which affected the efficiency in revealing the truth.

There were cases of certain media having privileged access to exclusive information from State institutions.

Investigative journalism has been affected as well, leading to difficulties in monitoring corruption and other phenomena which flourish during crises.

The early parliamentary elections in the country posed a particular challenge regarding the pandemic. Lack of diversity in media coverage, pluralism of voices and opinions, misuse of media space for political actors and their agenda and messages – were among the most common problems during the elections. Media, along with social networks, have often been used as a platform for spreading various ideologies and for manipulation.

Seventy per cent of the press complaints filed to the Council referred to coronavirus reporting. Most of the observed tendencies in the reporting included publishing false information or reporting things in a one-sided manner, biased reporting in favour of politicians, sensationalism and plagiarism. A large amount of content from social networks found its way into some of the media, mostly in the online sphere. Since the outbreak of the

first coronavirus case in our country, the Council of Media Ethics released a statement requesting prudent and responsible reporting concerning the crisis. Appeals were made for the media to act in a professional and ethical manner and to refrain from spreading untruths and raising alarm among the public. The Council also alerted the media to avoid serving as platforms for division among people as a result of various political calculations, and warned that the coronavirus must not be the 'weapon' to be used by any politician, whether in power or opposition, for political point scoring.

The authorities announced that they would monitor and punish people who publish misinformation on social media, i.e., untruths about the virus, as well as the media that cover the same misinformation. However, the professional media community pointed out that the main task of the institutions should be to ensure maximum transparency about the crisis caused by the pandemic and the economic crisis, and not dealing with restrictions on freedom of expression. The best way to address misinformation was considered to be greater transparency and media self-regulation.

The pandemic made other essential topics trivial and unattractive compared to the topic of the coronavirus. Newsrooms reported very little on the harmful effects of physical isolation, such as domestic violence, fear, and feelings of hopelessness. There was a lack of empathy and a more human perspective when reporting on health authorities' statistics on coronavirus patients and deaths. Few journalistic stories have highlighted issues specific to the elderly, women and the young.

The regulator, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, provided 103 million denars (1,672,246 Euro) to the media as first aid. Out of this, 73 million denars (1,185,184 Euro) were aimed at the commercial and non-profit broadcast media, to refund the licensing fee for 2019 and 2020. The public broadcaster received 30 million denars (487,062 Euro). It was clearly emphasized that the purpose of these sources of revenue was to protect the employees, purchase protective equipment, and cover expenses related to production of the programme to compensate the financial consequences of the crisis.

It proved that in our country, the media have the freedom to create media products even in a state of emergency. The large number of articles that press complaints have been filed against is further evidence of this. However, freedom does not always imply responsibility and hence a free media does not necessarily imply professional and ethical media.

Journalism should not be a "generator" of fear and mistrust among the public, especially in moments when rationality, good judgment and hope should prevail. In this light, supporting self-regulation is the only certain way for the media to improve their reporting practices, while protecting freedom of expression and reporting, without facing other mechanisms of control.

Self-regulation and the struggle within the media community are the only barriers to unethical reporting.

Fact-based media coverage is the antidote to the pandemic of misinformation, and this depends on media freedom and independent reporting. Journalists must be provided with free access to information to be able to look critically at the government and all political actors and scrutinize their response to the crisis. The flow of information about the pandemic should not be reduced to official communications. Malicious spreading of disinformation may be addressed with information campaigns.

Media and information literacy can provide individuals with the critical thinking needed to tackle the disinfodemic.

Multi-lateral and multi-stakeholder co-operation is needed to combat disinformation and pressure against the media and to facilitate better access to information.

Economic rescue packages, tax relief, subsidies, donations, or stimulus packages, coupled with guarantees of editorial independence and a plurality of media can be considered as options to help newsrooms.

Borka Rudić

Secretary General, BH Journalists Association

The COVID-19 pandemic has, without a doubt, changed journalism in our region in all segments, both in a positive and negative sense, but also in terms of access to credible, true and precise information, which is important for the citizens. This is a period of destruction of the media market and the media industry in the economic field, which has brought new challenges in the survival of the media and the paid work of journalists.

At the same time, we are recording an increasing number of threats and attacks against journalists and media, especially against those who carry out investigative and critical journalism on topics related to the activities of local public authorities. I would like to emphasize that the SafeJournalist platform has registered at least 115 cases of attacks on journalists and the media in the Western Balkan countries since the beginning of 2020. I would also like to emphasize that, in a survey conducted by the BH Journalists Association, we learned that the media's income from marketing was reduced by 80 per cent in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The situation is similar in other countries in our region.

On the other hand, the positive changes that have taken place in the media community include the strengthening of the role of the media in informing and educating citizens about the coronavirus. It seems to me that citizens reminded themselves and us journalists how media and journalism are important, and that without them it would not be possible to overcome the difficulties of quarantine, isolation and problems with the pandemic's influence on our society.

Session IV: Silencing Women Journalists - From Portraying to Online Harassment



Ana Lalić

Journalist, nova.rs

Detention and Arrest

In Serbia, after the state of emergency was announced on 16 March 2020, all health institutions, including hospitals, adopted an internal act whereby medical staff were prohibited from making any public statements related to COVID-19. All the information that the public obtained was hence from unofficial sources, because journalists did not want to jeopardize their jobs or safety.

On 1 April 2020, I published an article quoting three unofficial sources from the Clinical Center of Vojvodina, the largest county hospital where I live and work. The article contained information that there was a shortage of medical equipment, such as masks, aprons, gloves and so on. A couple of hours after the article was published, I was arrested. Twelve police officers were involved in my arrest. They searched my whole apartment for three hours and confiscated my computer. The police subsequently brought me to the police station, where I was criminally charged for spreading panic and placed in detention for a night.

One could say that the following experience is a good illustration of what it is like to be a female journalist in Serbia during the pandemic. Namely, at the police station, I was searched by a female police officer who took me to a filthy basement where I was ordered to take off my clothes. When the officer asked me why I was arrested, and I replied that I am a journalist, she did not seem surprised one bit, as if it is expected that a journalist should find herself in such a situation. In fact, the arrest itself was somehow the easier aspect of my experience, because what ensued was complete chaos. It was a period of a lot of pressure, where for months I was the target of the tabloids, but also of horrific online abuse and hatred. It developed in such a way that, from time to time, I had to close my social media accounts because of the threats and hurtful comments I received. It started from the top of the political establishment of the Serbian Government, as the Serbian Prime Minister, Ana Brnabić, called me a traitor of Serbia. This comment sort of set the precedent for how individuals could address and harass me. It was a couple of months of actual torture, including slashing of my car tires and identification of my home address. The online threats quickly materialized into actions in the real world. In the end, my employer offered me physical protection, which I still have, as well as a panic alarm, which I constantly need to have on me. The additional consequence, which has been hard for me to accept, was that nobody wanted to communicate with me or give me any sort of information. For months, I was simply ignored.

Received Support

All the noise and support around my case since my arrest really helped. There was a number of journalist associations and organizations dealing with women's rights who were supportive. However, it also draws attention when someone like me, who reports the news, suddenly becomes the news, and simultaneously, a target. It was exactly this nuisance that the Serbian Government did not count on and, I believe, was the reason why they did not extend my detention. I believe all of us on this panel can agree that the attention and support we receive from European and international organizations is what keeps us all alive.

However, it is also why online violence is on the rise. My name and my face being published in the media and on YouTube as a traitor of Serbia unleashed a wave of hatred from thousands of individuals. People who perhaps had read a text or two that I had written, suddenly started to hate me, writing to me how ugly I was or threatened me. Hence, I tried to protect my family by staying offline, closing social media accounts, and isolating. I was simply trying to do my job, pretending that nothing had happened and hoping that this would blow over.

Recommendation

If there is one recommendation I would like to share, it is that I would like to call on not only the government, but every single individual, to recognize that there is no difference between online and real-life violence. Should such a difference exist, it is simply that it is worse to be a victim online, because when you are attacked online, the chances of bringing the perpetrators to justice are null. It is simply an unfair fight.

Nidžara Ahmetašević

Freelance Journalist

Over the last couple of years, different types of attacks on journalists in Bosnia and Herzegovina are visibly increasing. These attacks are very often verbal and online, but increasing cases of physical violence are also noticeable. Unfortunately, a weak civil and civic society, the lack of rule of law, a general lack of human rights organizations, a non-existent syndicate, as well as weak and non-functional journalist associations, are making this problem even more prominent.

When it comes to women journalists, with a weak society such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, we are put in a situation where we are more often targeted, while the culprits go unpunished. In this way, to attack women journalists, by insulting them or questioning their credibility, has become a new normal for us who are working in these circumstances.

I can remember cases of colleagues who were publicly insulted by politicians, but nobody reacted or stood by them, as happened to Gordana Katana from Banja Luka. After one public attack, which received little to no reaction, the politician responsible for the attack did not suffer any consequences. Nor did the politician apologize; sending a signal that all women journalists are easy targets and that a witch-hunt can begin.

Over the years, I have been insulted, humiliated and attacked verbally on more than one occasion. Threats that I am receiving online for years are almost a normal occurrence in my life.

I am a journalist who focuses on reporting about human rights violations. For years, I used to write about facing the past and the consequences of war, while over the last six years my focus has shifted to migration. The choice of topics made me an easy target in this country. Unfortunately, even though I tried to report different types of attacks to the police on several occasions, the only thing I achieved is to become a target of police misconduct. Most often, the police are not even willing to consider my reports, while, more recently, they not only refuse to help me, but they use every opportunity to make me feel insecure while doing my job, taking me to court on five occasions for various, and often false, accusations (they were proven false in court). Then, several months ago, I was the victim of an attempt of physical violence. When I called the police to report the attack, they refused to help me or even write a report about what happened.

Several months ago, while I was video recording how the police was arresting a group of migrants on the streets of Sarajevo for no reason, one of the police officers threatened me with arrest, and refused to accept my press card as a valid identification document. Unfortunately, when I called the Help Line, which is run by the association Bh Novinari, they also refused to help me. The association later put me under more pressure, and even though I

refused any help from them after they ignored my call for help, they processed my case, and contacted the police without my approval. After receiving a statement from the police, who practically denied everything that happened, they made a public statement and continued to intimidate me, questioning publicly my credibility and putting me in an even more difficult situation.

However, it is not only local authorities and organizations or individuals that are responsible for these attacks on women journalists. I had a very unpleasant situation with the International Organization for Migration in Bosnia. They not only refused to work with me, preventing me from visiting camps that they run in Bosnia or to access to information (which is also something that UNHCR is doing to me), but the head of the organization publicly questioned my credibility and insulted me on several occasions on his social network. He backed away only after another man, a fellow journalist, asked him publicly to stop. Everything was happening on social networks. However, IOM continued with preventing me from doing my work and they started sending emails to different media outlets that I am working with or the media outlets I was interviewed by. I will give just one example.

Last year, I spoke about the situation with refugees and migrants in Bosnia to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. After the outlet published my interview, the interviewer received an official email from IOM in Sarajevo saying that I am not credible and that I should not be the person with whom to talk about the issue. My colleague, of course, laughed and forwarded this email to me. When I confronted IOM, in particular the person whose name was signed in that letter, and asked why they did this, she denied it. I am still blacklisted by IOM, and my work is very much affected by the way they treat me. However, I am not the only journalist to be put in this situation by different international organizations present in Bosnia.

I have to use this opportunity and to say that, again, I received no help from any side. Some told me that the person who is doing this to me, the head of IOM in this situation, is a high-ranking diplomat. I guess that should be enough for me.

These are just some of the examples from my work. I can go on and talk about it for a long time, and I am sure that many colleagues could say even more. Unfortunately, in the situation we are in, with the very patriarchal society we all live in, we will probably face even more problems in the future.

Vanja Čalović Marković

Director, Network for Affirmation for the NGO Sector, Montenegro

A woman investigating top-level corruption and organized crime in a captured State and male-dominant society needs even more layers of support than her male colleagues, especially compared to those working in established democracies. In some cases, tactics used by corrupted politicians or criminal networks are highly innovative, and you can hardly be ready for what you will face. I will tell you what happened to me in Montenegro, a small country in the Western Balkans, which is a member of NATO and the most advanced candidate for EU membership.

First, they tried to ignore me, then they attempted to suck me into the system by offering me various lucrative positions. When that did not work, they gave me numerous “friendly warnings” that were actually disguised as threats. Then, some institutions made me a target by investigating whether my organization revealed personal data about two organized crime bosses. In the first case, after we publicly disclosed links between high-level intelligence officials and organized crime structures from the Western Balkan region, the police and prosecution used international co-operation with the United States of America to find out who disclosed that information, and placed my organization’s internet communication under surveillance for six months. Imagine how sloppy they were when we managed to prove in court that the actions of the police were illegal and violated our privacy. Nevertheless, no one was held accountable. In another case, I was under investigation for nearly two years before the Prosecutor informed me I was even being investigated. Eventually, the prosecution gave up on the case, but they never provided me with the information collected during the investigation.

However, all of this is part of the job for many of my colleagues working in captured States. Institutions that should protect journalists frequently target them along with human rights defenders revealing crimes committed by high-level political or organized crime figures. Media under their control conduct smear campaigns in order to distort facts and disguise crimes exposed in investigative stories. So, various forms of pressure from public institutions and public officials, along with treats from organized crime and intelligence officials, were also part of our lives, but they did not prepare us for what would happen next.

Political and criminal structures tried to destroy my life to the extent that I wished, on many occasions, that they would have murdered me instead. By spreading horrible lies, they tried to discredit me publicly, and eventually the credibility of my work.

Following local elections in 2014, when MANS exposed various cases of political corruption and vote buying practices, a special edition of the Serbian tabloid “Informer”, for Montenegro, initiated a smear campaign against me. It began with a video and story purporting to show me engaging in bestiality.

Day by day, on more than 50 cover pages, they republished the article featuring scenes of a woman engaged in animal sex with the question “Is this Vanja Calovic?”. Mainstream media under government control immediately picked up the story, with politicians getting involved, and it eventually became the top story in the country.

Such public lynching has never been seen before in Montenegrin media or in the region, and day-by-day, the campaign got more intense. It was hard to decide how to respond to such accusations whilst maintaining my dignity. It was a psychological war.

As you can imagine, many people provided me with advice on how to act and what to do. I was offered various scholarships and jobs in other countries. While it was important to know that there were alternatives, I knew that I could not give up, not only because of myself, but because my case was supposed to be an example for all those who dared to talk about corruption. If they silenced me by using such tools, everyone would be afraid of suffering a similar horrible fate and would remain silent.

I wanted to understand what was done and by whom. The published video was blurred and obviously edited, but I was not able to distance myself from the case. MANS was lucky to have the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) as partners, and they offered their help in investigating the case.

They found out who the person was that initially distributed the video that was used for the smear campaign – Vladimir Beba Popovic. Popovic originates from Serbia, and the Montenegrin public was not widely aware of his connections with our government. Therefore, I knew that I had to wait until the structure behind the campaign, which engaged Popovic for the dirty work, exposed itself. Fairly soon, Djukanovic himself, who was Prime Minister at the time, claimed that I was a deviant person who is unfit to do any public job.

Knowing the nature of the regime, it was clear to me that the whole system would stand behind Djukanovic’s words and take ownership of the smear campaign. Following that, at a press conference, I published my findings about the source of those disgusting allegations. Of course, the regime supported the smear campaign even more after that.

Then the other side of society reacted, namely media that were not under the control of the government, NGOs, academics, international organizations and various embassies. NGOs organized the first such online campaign in Montenegro where various people participated by sharing their photo with a message: “Clean campaign”. The message quickly spread across the border and many well-known individuals and ordinary people from the region condemned the smear campaign. Various international organizations, as well

as my colleagues from NGOs operating all over the world, sent letters to the government, signed petitions and issued public statements.

Finally, it ended. Nevertheless, the second phase started two months later, when the European Commission published their EU Accession Progress report, underlining issues related to political corruption that we disclosed as matters of serious concern.

Repeated attacks were somewhat easier to handle, because we already had some experience and awareness of key stakeholders on the issue. This time, some public institutions finally acted because of strong public pressure. Yet, their reactions were only formal and post factum, and they did not attempt to stop the campaign. In that period, news shops had to use special newsstands to expose “Informer” to consumers more than other media. Many organizations dealing with children’s rights reacted because the cover page involving a photo of naked women was widely available to minors.

The majority of the public condemned the smear campaign. Various international partners frequently urged decision-makers to find solutions that would cease the campaign. And it finally happened.

I thought it was the end. However, it was just the beginning of another struggle. When they could not break me mentally and embarrass me in public, they tried to ruin me financially.

Vladimir Popovic sued me for claiming that he initially started the smear campaign. Despite the fact that he publicly admitted his involvement, I was found guilty and was required to publish the verdict in all media in Montenegro and Serbia. Not all registered media, not all media that published that information, but simply “all media”. There are thousands of such media. The verdict was not enforceable, because some cable TV stations, such as HBO or Euronews, never publish such information.

The Higher Court confirmed the verdict and I filed a complaint with the Supreme Court. Unfortunately, that type of complaint does not delay the enforcement of the Higher Court’s decision, and while I was on a business trip abroad, Popovic’s lawyers had blocked my bank account and credit cards.

The Supreme Court delayed its decision and only after another round of pressure from international community did it finally made the verdict and decided that I was not guilty.

This experience really confirmed the saying “what doesn’t break you, makes you stronger”, but it was not easy and I do not wish it to happen to anyone. If it does, this is what I learned: engage others to investigate your case, they will be much more objective than yourself; it is important to have a response from various groups in society, and the internet is a very important tool in

obtaining wide support; co-ordinated international pressure is necessary to deliver results in high-level political cases.

Gentiana Begolli-Pustina

President of the Board of AJK

It is very unfortunate how social media is the most used tool by politicians and other groups to attack, threaten, insult and publicly lynch journalists, particularly women journalists. Based on AJK's database from previous years, a considerable number of threats are directed towards women journalists and most of the time those threats have been made via online tools.

The harshest case lately is the one of journalist Zana Cimili. A still unknown person (to the public), threatened her via Instagram by commenting on her daughter's picture posted on the social media platform. This comment was written in Serbian and said that this person's greatest desire is to kill an Albanian: "truth be told, without a problem I would rip an Albanian child with my teeth. This is unbelievable. I thank you for your contribution, throughout your job" he wrote. "I hope a new war will start in Kosovo and this time the Albanian terrorists and invaders will have the chance to feel the Serbian anger; the longing for justice and freedom."

This person was later arrested in Serbia and sentenced with house arrest, as well as banned from accessing the internet. This case took place in 2018.

Our organization's database has also identified public lynching, mainly via social media, by public officials towards women journalists. The most recent case of public lynching towards a woman journalist was of Jeta Xharra, with insults made by Gani Koci, a senior official of the PDK political party. He used Facebook to insult the journalist by saying: "The time has come not only to disinfect the septic tanks, but to shut with cement those Serbian septic tanks remaining in Kosovo. They stink!" So according to this senior political official, Xharra is a septic tank that needs to be cemented. This case took place in July 2020.

A few months back, on a Facebook page, the same journalist Jeta Xharra, as well as two male journalists, were lynched and called mercenaries by a political official in Kosovo.

In May 2020, a police officer prevented journalist Yllka Ahmetxhekaj from doing her job. While on duty, she received a phone call by a person claiming to be a police officer in the Investigative Unit in Gjilan (a city in south-eastern Kosovo). The officer allegedly told Ahmetxhekaj that she has committed a felony offence and that other phone calls will follow, as a result of her work regarding a particular case, which will be further looked into.

Previous cases:

Another case is the one of journalist Arbana Xharra. A person named Ebu Duxhane threatened her on Facebook. He posted a picture of a headless

man on Facebook with a description that said: “Just so you know, we will find you” and “We know how much you love your children”. This took place in September 2017.

The most recent case that displays these degrading tendencies and attacks towards women journalists is the one towards the journalist of the public broadcaster RTK, Jehona Zhitia. She was covering the pandemic crisis, and was the first journalist to report from within the clinic where patients with COVID-19 were being treated. She claims to have had faced accusations of citizens claiming she was creating “fake news” and of propagandizing regarding COVID-19, for her own benefit from certain interest groups.

She faced these accusations while she herself was being treated for COVID-19 after a long period of reporting in the field. To Zhitia, these attacks were offending, concerning and dangerous towards a woman journalist covering the pandemic.

What is the solution?

The identification and punishment of all the people who use social media to threaten journalists can serve as a useful awareness-building tool.

The actual situation:

AJK has continuously requested from the judiciary to take threats against journalists seriously, in order to create a safe working environment for journalists. Until now, we are not satisfied with the level of judiciary engagement in the legal approach towards these cases. There is nevertheless something positive that came out of this: the categorization of attacks towards journalists. Now these attacks are directly filed in the Major Crimes Division and are treated as such.

AJK has been monitoring the position and state of journalists in Kosovo, emphasizing their safety on duty. No improvement has yet been witnessed however. On the contrary, the situation continues to get worse. In 2019, we registered 21 attacks towards journalists, whilst from January 2020 until now we have registered 18 cases, which says a lot about the climate of journalism. Six out of 18 of last-year’s cases including attacks, threats and other tools of pressure are towards women.

There are women journalists in Kosovo who hesitate to take part in TV shows because their performance becomes news on online portals, for which they receive a lot of degrading and lynching comments, even threats, regarding their opinion on ongoing developments.

Silvia Chocarro

Head of Protection of Journalists & Human Rights Defenders,
ARTICLE 19

Online Harassment and Abuse: Silencing Women Journalists

The safety of journalists remains a serious issue globally, as does the lack of justice for cases of murder, assault, and harassment, with an increase of such attacks in the online sphere.¹³ Governments and other powerful actors continue to attempt to silence criticism directed towards them, often seeking to escape scrutiny and stifle dissent.¹⁴ The silencing of journalists – in particular those uncovering stories of political corruption, abuses by the State or powerful private companies, protests and social movements – deprives the public of their right to know, and undermines the mechanisms of democratic accountability.¹⁵

The type of threats and attacks to which journalists are exposed is often closely linked and varies according to their gender, and other intersecting aspects of their identity, including on their race and ethnicity, religion or belief, age, economic class, location (urban/rural), among other factors, including other risk factors such as being a freelancer. For women journalists, this means they experience an additional layer of risks than their male counterparts simply because of their gender. Moreover, women journalists not only face violence while reporting, but also inside their own newsrooms, where they are supposed to be safe.

In recent years, while the internet has grown substantially and has created new spaces for exercising the right to freedom of expression, it has also caused an increase in harassment and abuse, in particular against women who are active in the public sphere, such as politicians and journalists. Attacks against women journalists are often sexualized, and extended to their personal and family lives. Not only do these attacks reinforce inequality, but they also have a severe impact on freedom of expression as they drive women offline, limit their journalistic reporting and, inevitably, their ability to challenge discrimination and inequality in society.¹⁶

International standards are increasingly addressing this particular issue, but the gap is on the implementation. The OSCE Ministerial Council Decision No. 3/18 on the Safety of Journalists expresses specific concern about “*the distinct risks faced by women journalists in relation to their work*” and recognizes that attacks come in many forms, “*such as sexual harassment, abuse, intimidation, threats and violence, including through digital*

¹³ ARTICLE 19. Global Expression Report 2019/2020. <https://www.article19.org/gxr2020>

¹⁴ ARTICLE 19. Global Expression Report 2018/2019. <https://www.article19.org/xpa-2019/>

¹⁵ ARTICLE 19. Ending Impunity: Acting on UN Standards on the Safety of Journalists. 2019. <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/SOJ-Web.pdf>

¹⁶ ARTICLE 19. Freedom of expression and women's equality: Ensuring comprehensive rights protection. <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Gender-Paper-Brief-1.pdf>

technologies".¹⁷ The 2020 Human Rights Council Resolution 45/18 calls on States to adopt comprehensive measures to protect women journalists, including to "prevent sexual harassment and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence", to "encourage the reporting of harassment or violence by providing gender-sensitive investigative procedures", and to "provide adequate support, remedy, reparations and compensation for victims". Moreover, it urges political leaders and public officials to "refrain from using misogynist or any discriminatory language towards women journalists".¹⁸

Online harassment and abuse must be dealt with with the same determination as offline violence. It is real and it has real impact on the safety and wellbeing of journalists, on the future of free, independent and pluralistic journalism, and on the right to freedom of expression. We must act now.

¹⁷ OSCE. Ministerial Council Decision No.3/18 on Safety of Journalists.

<https://www.osce.org/files/mcdec0003%20safety%20of%20journalists%20en.pdf>

¹⁸ UN Human Rights Council. Resolution 45/18 on the safety of journalists. <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/RES/45/18>

ANNEX



Agenda



AGENDA

7th OSCE South East Europe Media Conference

The New Frontline:
Working Together to Foster Media
Freedom

Day 1: Safety of Journalists

09:15 Participants able to connect via online platform ZOOM (access link to be distributed)

Conference Moderator: Adis Mustedanagić, Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

09:30 Welcome note

- **Jürgen Heissel**, Director, Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media
- **Inid Milo**, Head OSCE Chairmanship TASK FORCE, Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania
- **H.E. Andrea Orizio**, Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia

10:00 Keynote speech: *Promoting Media Freedom: Focus on Western Balkans*

Patrick Penninckx, Head of the Information Society Department, Council of Europe

10:15 Panel session I: *Opportunities and Challenges in Establishing an Efficient National Mechanism for Protection of Journalists – Serbia and the Netherlands Working Groups for Safety of Journalists*

The growing lack of safety for journalists has been one of the most poignant and widespread concerns across the region. In December 2016, the Ministry of Interior of Serbia, the Republic Public Prosecutor's Office, and seven media and journalist associations signed the Agreement on co-operation and measures to increase the level of safety of journalists. In January 2017, the Permanent Working Group for Safety of Journalists, consisting of members of all signatories, was established. Besides the founding of the Working Group, the Agreement also envisaged the establishment of a Contact Point System as an entirely new mechanism for urgent and co-ordinated response to cases of attacks against journalists.

In July 2018, the Dutch law enforcement authorities and the media community reached an Agreement to jointly counter violence and threats against journalists. These initiatives are examples of how constructive dialogue, involving all stakeholders, can lead to significant steps forward in providing the necessary conditions for improving safety of journalists. However, in order to become effective, these complex processes need time, permanent learning and mutual understanding of all parties involved. This panel session will focus on the opportunities and challenges faced by both working groups in their efforts to address the growing impunity for attacks on journalists.

- **Branko Stamenković**, Deputy Republic Public Prosecutor of the Republic of Serbia and Member of the Permanent Working Group for Safety of Journalists
- **Peter ter Velde**, Security Coordinator of the Dutch Broadcasting Corporation NOS and of Press Safety, PersVeilig
- **Toni Angelovski**, Assistant Minister for Public Relations, Ministry of Interior, North Macedonia
- **Moderator: Gordana Janković**, Head of Media, OSCE Mission to Serbia

11:45 Coffee break: *Streaming of video stories about local journalists produced by the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation*

12:15 Panel session II: *Unifying National Databases, Analysis and Reporting on Attacks and Violence against Journalists*

The OSCE's Ministerial Council Decision on Safety of Journalists (No. 3/18) calls on participating States "to establish or strengthen, where possible, national data collection, analysis and reporting on attacks and violence against journalists". Since the adoption of this document, some participating States have launched various initiatives in order to establish national databases that will provide the most accurate and reliable information about the nature and extent of media freedom violations.

This panel session will offer a platform for discussion on current regional practices and successful examples for establishing efficient mechanisms

for documenting attacks, and other forms of violence, against journalists by law enforcement authorities and journalist associations. Databases created by journalist associations often offer different numbers of registered attacks on journalists compared to those established by the police or the prosecution. This situation adds a layer of complexity to their joint efforts aimed at fighting impunity for crimes against journalists and other media professionals.

- **Snezana Trpevska**, President, Research Institute on Social Development, North Macedonia
- **Sanela Gorušanović-Butigan**, Vice President, High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina
- **Ardi Veliu**, Director of the General Directorate State Police, Albania
- **Ana Bošković**, State Prosecutor in the Basic State Prosecutor's Office, Montenegro
- **Moderator: Antonius Van Den Brandt**, Senior Adviser, Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

13:30 End of Day I

Day 2: Journalism in the era of COVID-19

09:15 Participants able to connect via online platform ZOOM (access link to be distributed)

09:30 Welcome note

- **H.E. Sem Fabrizi**, Head of the EU Delegation to Serbia
- **H.E. Jørn Eugene Gjølstad**, Royal Norwegian Ambassador to Serbia

10:00 Keynote speech: *COVID-19 and the media: The role of Journalism in a Global Pandemic*

- **Guy Berger**, Director for Freedom of Expression and Media Development, UNESCO

10:15 Panel session III: *COVID-19's Impact on Media Freedom in the Western Balkans*

In times of public health emergency, such as the present COVID-19 pandemic, journalism serves an indispensable role, particularly when it aims to inform the public of critical information and monitors government actions. At this panel session, various experts from the region will discuss the impact of the COVID-19 related measures on media freedom in the Western Balkans, with a particular focus on lessons learned that can be of use to all stakeholders in creating a conducive media environment. According to reports issued by relevant local and international organizations, many cases of measures jeopardizing media freedom and freedom of expression were registered throughout the OSCE region during

the current health crisis.

Over the past months, with COVID-19 related restrictions and lockdowns, media witnessed both a heightened public demand for information and an ever more impeded access to reliable data retained by public authorities. At the same time, the health crisis has led to an adverse economic impact on the media sector, with a significant decline in circulation and advertising revenues.

- **Mogens Blicher Bjerregård**, President, European Federation of Journalists
- **Saša Mirković**, Lecturer, University Singidunum, The School for Media and Communication, Serbia
- **Marina Tuneva**, Executive Director, Council of Media Ethics, North Macedonia
- **Moderator: Borka Rudić**, Secretary General, BH Journalists Association

11:30 Coffee break: *Streaming of video stories about local journalists produced by the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation*

12:00 Panel Session IV: *Silencing Women Journalists - From Portraying to Online Harassment*

Female journalists are experiencing gender related threats, harassment and intimidation, in particular online. This does not only have a direct impact on their individual safety, but also risks to create a chilling effect on their journalistic activities and participation in public discourse, impacting on society's access to a plurality of voices and information. In this panel session women journalists as well as State institutions will address how participating States have so far responded to this growing concern. In addition, concrete actions on how to move from policy to practice will be presented and discussed, partly based on the forthcoming RFoM #SOFJO Resource Guide that will be published in fall 2020.

The OSCE Ministerial Council's groundbreaking Decision on Safety of Journalists expresses specific concern about "the distinct risks faced by women journalists in relation to their work, including through digital technologies" and recognizes that attacks come in many forms, "such as sexual harassment, abuse, intimidation, threats and violence, including through digital technologies". It underlines the importance of ensuring that such attacks and threats are effectively addressed by the governments and law enforcement authorities. Furthermore, the RFoM Communiqué on Media Pluralism, Safety of Female Journalists and Safeguarding Marginalized Voices Online recommends participating States to establish regular multi-stakeholder dialogue involving all main actors to ensure a holistic and systematic response to online harassment of female journalists, and to foster the development of innovative responses to online

harassment in line with international human rights standards.

Testimonials: Covering news amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

- **Ana Lalić**, Journalist, nova.rs
- **Nidžara Ahmetašević**, Freelance Journalist

Panellists:

- **Vanja Čalović Marković**, Director, Network for Affirmation for the NGO Sector, Montenegro
- **Gentiana Begolli-Pustina**, President of the Board of AJK
- **Moderator: Silvia Chocarro**, Head of Protection of Journalists & Human Rights Defenders, ARTICLE 19

13:00 Closing remarks

- **Jürgen Heissel**, Director, Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media
- **Gordana Janković**, Head of Media, OSCE Mission to Serbia

13:30 End of Day II

Press Release

Stronger collective efforts needed to protect journalists against growing threats, concludes seventh OSCE South-East Europe Media Conference

VIENNA/BELGRADE, 18 September 2020 – The seventh South-East Europe Media Conference entitled “The New Frontline: Working together to Foster Media Freedom”, organized jointly by the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM) and the OSCE Mission to Serbia, in collaboration with OSCE field operations from South-East Europe, concluded today.

The two-day online event gathered over 200 participants, including journalists and media experts from the region and abroad, civil society organizations and representatives from law enforcement and the judiciary. Participants discussed the most pressing media freedom challenges in the region. Special attention was paid to the safety of journalists and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on journalists’ ability to perform their professional activities.

“The safety of journalists and the fight against impunity for attacks against journalists are paramount to safeguarding freedom of expression and ensuring a safe and enabling media environment,” said Jürgen Heissel, Director of the Office of the OSCE RFoM. “This is a commitment that all 57 OSCE participating States jointly pledged to uphold in the landmark OSCE Ministerial Council Decision on Safety of Journalists adopted in 2018.”

Participants also discussed the overarching impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on media freedom. “Over the past months, the media witnessed a heightened public demand for information and were faced with COVID-19 related restrictions and lockdowns, including an ever more impeded access to reliable data retained by public authorities,” added Heissel.

In addition, the event provided all participants with an opportunity to exchange experience and best practices in the area of establishing effective national mechanisms for co-ordinated responses to threats and violence against journalists. In this light, Heissel underlined the crucial role of law enforcement agencies and the judiciary in protecting and ensuring a safe and conducive media environment, both online and offline, and in combating impunity for crimes against journalists and other media professionals.

Andrea Orizio, Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia, highlighted the opportunities and challenges in establishing national mechanisms to ensure the safety of journalists. “The OSCE Mission’s partnership with Serbia’s Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists can serve as a model of professional and fruitful co-operation between the State institutions, civil society and the international community. This is illustrated by the fact that the law enforcement authorities, the media and journalists’ associations have

successfully taken ownership of the process that we jointly initiated. Only together can we achieve more in terms of growth of media freedom in the region,” said Orizio.

Heissel underscored the need for stronger efforts to tackle the specific challenges to the safety of women journalists online, who face additional threats of sexual violence, intimidation and gender discrimination, especially in the online sphere. In this light, a preview of the OSCE RFoM’s newly developed Resource Guide on safety of female journalists online was presented at the conference, outlining important points of action for different stakeholders to reinforce the safety of women journalists online through gender-responsive approaches.

More information about the conference can be found here:

<https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/462792>.

