



## EUROPEAN UNION

### OSCE Permanent Council No. 1273 Vienna, 2 July 2020

#### **EU Statement in response to the Report by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Mr Harlem Désir**

The European Union warmly welcomes the Representative on Freedom of the Media, Mr Harlem Désir, to the Permanent Council and thanks him for his comprehensive report.

Freedom of expression and media freedom lie at the very core of the OSCE's comprehensive concept of security and are top priorities for the European Union, including in the OSCE. There is a clear link between democratic, open, peaceful and prosperous societies that contribute to our common and comprehensive security and stability, and free expression and free media.

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media is a unique and invaluable resource available to participating States. His autonomous role is needed to provide early warning and rapid response when states fall short in implementing their commitments. We stand firmly with the Representative on Freedom of the Media as an institution and fully support his mandate, which is flexible enough to respond to existing threats to freedom of expression and media freedom, including in digital contexts, and to address emerging challenges, also in light of the current COVID-19 pandemic.

We commend your professional, impartial and dedicated work, Mr. Désir, and we look forward to continuing working together in the next three years. We use this opportunity to call on all participating States to extend the appointment of all four heads of institutions and thus ensure the proper functioning of the organisation under a strong leadership.

Without freedom of expression and freedom of the media, active citizenry is impossible. Regrettably, there are still considerable challenges across the OSCE region. We continue to follow the situation of media freedom and safety of journalists in the OSCE participating States and we share many of the concerns raised by the Representative in his current report. We have expressed our concerns many times in the OSCE Permanent Council and in the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting regarding the worrying developments in Azerbaijan, Belarus, the Russian Federation, Turkey and in Central Asian countries and we will continue to do so. We also remain deeply concerned about the dire situation of freedom of expression in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and City of Sevastopol, illegally annexed by Russia, as well as in areas held by Russia-backed armed formations in eastern Ukraine. We expect that existing violations will be addressed, and the negative trends reversed.

During a public health emergency, governments must make exceptional efforts to protect the work of journalists and media actors. Free, independent and pluralistic media, online and offline, has an important role in providing the public with relevant and trustworthy information about the current COVID-19 pandemic. We echo the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the IACHR Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, who underlined that journalism serves a crucial function at a moment of public health emergency.

We note that decrees and amendments to legislation are still being adopted in some OSCE participating States and we echo the concerns expressed by the Representative in this regard. While these decrees and amendments are meant to fight disinformation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, they could restrict the media and journalists from reporting freely on it. In addition, we remain deeply concerned about the shrinking space for independent media and the suppression of critical voices in some participating States, including through misuse of reinforced anti-extremism and anti-terrorism legislation, and “foreign agents” and “undesirable organisations” legislation.

We condemn threats by state officials against journalists, their detention or investigation because of their reporting about the pandemic and forcing them to reveal their sources, as well as the removal of media content under the pretext of spreading false information about the pandemic. Not granting to detained journalists the same

treatment and chance to be released as other inmates just because they are journalists is totally unacceptable.

We have to make sure that critical voices can be heard and that journalists and media actors can perform their work, safely, independently and without undue interference and influence. It is therefore crucial that states live up to their international obligations and OSCE commitments and we, the European Union, remain committed to this end.

Out of 40 countries mentioned by the Representative in his report, 19 are EU Member States. We are aware that the European Union Member States are not immune to problems and shortcomings, and the current unprecedented situation presents challenges to us all. We study carefully all recommendations directed to us and we will continue to engage fully with the Representative on Freedom of the Media in advancing the situation for media within the EU. We take seriously the commitment, made by all participating States, to cooperate fully with the Representative.

We highly appreciate all the work of the Office in supporting participating States in upholding their commitments in these challenging times. Sexual and gender-based attacks on women journalists remain a pressing issue and we look forward to the resource guide on *Safety of female journalists online*. We also support the continued work on Artificial Intelligence, and we would appreciate more information on the Office's future plans on this topic.

We thank the Representative on Freedom of the Media and his able team for their tireless work and wish you all every success.

The Candidate Countries REPUBLIC of NORTH MACEDONIA\*, MONTENEGRO\* and ALBANIA\*, and the EFTA countries ICELAND and LIECHTENSTEIN align themselves with this statement.

\* Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.