

Seminar on the occasion of the 10th Anniversary of the OSCE Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media

Present and future challenges to media freedom and free expression in the OSCE region

**Secretary of State Mr. Pertti Torstila
Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland**

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Mr. Chair

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentleman,

It is a great honour for me on behalf of the Finnish OSCE Chairmanship to address this Seminar on the occasion of the 10th Anniversary of the Representative on Freedom of the Media.

It is also a great pleasure for me personally to be back at the OSCE in Vienna, where I served in the early 1990's as the Permanent Representative of Finland to the OSCE and followed closely the significant steps taken to strengthen the participating States' commitments in the field of human rights and democratisation. The decision in December 1997 to establish the Representative on Freedom of the Media was a logical step to support participating States in fulfilling their commitments.

In our Chairmanship programme for 2008 Finland stresses the importance of the freedoms of expression, assembly and association as fundamental freedoms that bear great value in themselves, but also as freedoms contributing to the fulfilment of human rights in general. Often enjoyment of these fundamental freedoms reveals how closely they may be inter-linked and sometimes even inter-dependent. In this broader context the right to freedom of expression and free, independent and pluralistic media is one of the essential components of a democratic society.

The Finnish OSCE Chairmanship gives it full support to the activities of the Media Representative Mr. Miklos Haraszti and his Office in providing early warning on violations on freedom of expression and in assisting participating States from Vancouver to Vladivostok to fulfil their commitments. Finland calls on the participating States to reconfirm their commitments to freedoms of expression and media. We look forward to continued discussions among the participating States in this respect.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentleman,

Journalists and other media professionals work often under difficult and many times also dangerous circumstances. Too many times journalists are being harassed and attacked physically for carrying out their professional duties. The Finnish Chairmanship on its part will seek to ensure support for the invaluable work of these brave people, which they should be able to carry out freely without fear for their own or their families' lives or their personal freedom.

The age of digitalisation allows information to be transferred in the blink of an eye around the globe. The Internet provides enormous potential for sharing rapidly information and enhancing cultural dialogue. It is at the same time a tool whereby reprehensible forms of expression such as hate speech and child pornography are easily distributed. It is important that governments work together with media professionals in order to in a balanced manner address these new challenges.

The limits of free expression and the right of media to take up controversial or provocative issues for debate are constantly put to test in all corners of the OSCE area. At the international level the complex combination of freedom of expression in relation to freedom of religion has again been subject to increased attention.

While freedom of expression is not an unlimited or absolute freedom, great caution should be exercised by governments in establishing restrictions on this freedom. As far as possible the media itself should be allowed to decide where to draw the line. Media self-regulation has proven to be an efficient tool to ensure media workers' professionalism, accuracy and adherence to ethical codes of conduct established by journalists' organisations while exercising their freedom of expression.

Finland encourages a dialogue on freedom of expression in the OSCE. At its best a healthy and forward-looking debate covers various aspects of the freedom and is constructive, positively engaged and professionally inspired. It may also be sharply questioning, concretely problem-centred and genuinely challenging.

I congratulate Mr. Haraszti and his staff on the occasion of the 10th Anniversary of their important Office. I would like to thank him and his predecessor Mr. Freimut Duve for their excellent contributions in making the Representative on Freedom of the Media one of the important supportive pillars of our organisation.

I look forward to the presentations by our distinguished panellists and discussions to be followed, which I trust will contribute further to the promotion of free expression in the OSCE area.

Thank you.