



EUROPEAN UNION

**OSCE Permanent Council 1421
Vienna, 4 May 2023**

EU Statement on the World Press Freedom Day

1. World Press Freedom Day is an occasion to reflect on the indispensable role that free, diverse and independent media plays in society. Within the OSCE, it is a reminder that freedom of expression lies at the core of the comprehensive concept of security. We welcome this year's global theme "*Freedom of expression as a driver for all other human rights*". Media freedom, access to information and safety of journalists are as vital online as they are offline. Journalists and media actors must be able to carry out their work safely, independently and without undue interference or influence. In Milan 2018, we all committed to ensure a safe working environment for journalists. 2022 saw a sharp rise in the number of journalists and media actors killed while performing their work as well as in the number of imprisoned journalists and media actors. It is our common duty to reverse this unacceptable backslide.
2. Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, which we condemn in the strongest terms, is a blatant violation of international law and our OSCE commitments. As has been concluded in the Moscow Mechanism reports, journalists and media actors have been killed, abducted, injured and tortured by Russian forces in Ukraine. They have also been arbitrarily detained and put under pressure to cooperate with the occupiers. We recall that journalists covering conflicts are entitled to protection under international humanitarian law. We deplore the verdict against citizen journalist Iryna Danylovykh to 7 years in penal colony in the illegally annexed Crimean peninsula and call for her immediate release.

3. Russia's external aggression is mirrored by internal repression. Russia has been rapidly moving towards a situation of complete censorship and isolation of its citizens from any source of independent information, as stated by the RFoM. Equally, the Moscow Mechanism report last year concluded that the draconian measures imposed by Russian authorities, such as the blocking of thousands of websites and the declaration of organisations providing information as "extremist" or "undesirable", have suffocated the last remnants of independent journalism inside Russia. As a result, news and investigative media portals such as *Meduza*, *Proekt*, *Istories*, *The Insider* and Bellingcat have been outlawed. Many journalists and media actors have been forced to leave Russia. Several journalists and media actors have been prosecuted and/or sentenced, including Dmitry Ivanov, Vladimir Kara-Murza, Alexander Nevzorov, Andrey Novashov, Maria Ponomarenko and Ivan Safronov. The EU condemns the outrageous-court decision sentencing Vladimir Kara-Murza to 25 years in prison for exercising his right to freedom of expression. The EU furthermore reiterates its condemnation of the detention of Evan Gershkovich, a journalist and U.S. citizen.
4. We encourage all participating States, and in light of recent human rights and media freedom indexes, particularly Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, to take steps to fully respect their OSCE commitments.
5. We urge Belarus to end the ongoing crackdown on independent media and condemn the brutal repression aimed at silencing any independent voices, such as the decision on 7 March to designate the Belarusian Association of Journalists as an "extremist formation". We reiterate our urgent call to immediately stop the persecution of media actors in retaliation for their work, including through criminal charges against media actors such as Aleh Rubchenia, Larysa Shchyrakova, Siarhei Stankevich and many others. We condemn the politically motivated verdicts against journalists and media actors such as Lyudmila Chekina, Valeryia Kastsuhova, Dzmitry Luksha, Hienadz Mažejka, Andrzej Poczobut, Dzmitry Semchanka and Maryna Zolatava.

6. In Türkiye, the EU continues to follow with concern the ongoing judicial proceedings against media actors and human rights activists, including Erol Önderoğlu, Ahmet Nesin and Şebnem Korur Fincancı, as well as the recent mass arrests. We follow the implementation of the law aimed at criminalising the spread of disinformation in the online sphere, and recall the concerns expressed by the RFoM in the run-up to the adoption of the law. Particularly in the lead-up to the general elections on 14 May, it is important that media plurality is guaranteed, and that the fair treatment of all political parties and candidates is ensured. We welcome the deployment of the OSCE/ODIHR EOM, following Türkiye's invitation, and will closely monitor its findings following the elections.
7. In Azerbaijan, the "On Media" law that entered into force last year poses limitations and restrictions on the right to freedom of expression and freedom of the media, as outlined in the RFoM's legal analysis. The EU encourages Azerbaijan to review and incorporate the RFoM's recommendations into law.
8. Participating States should scrutinise the implementation of their commitments and obligations related to freedom of expression and media freedom. We are aware that the EU and its Member States are not immune to shortcomings in this field and we deeply appreciate the exchanges with the RFoM.
9. The EU is taking action within the Union: countering Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP), regulating digital services and markets, and proposing an EU Media Freedom Act. We are building up critical capacity to counter foreign information manipulation and interference, and to help citizens in Europe strengthen their resilience to disinformation, manipulation and propaganda, with initiatives such as *EUvsDisinfo* platform and the European Digital Media Observatory.
10. The RFoM is a unique and valuable resource for participating States, and the EU stands firmly by the institution and its mandate, which is more relevant than ever. We call on all participating States to engage constructively with the RFoM and to draw on her Office's expertise to remedy shortcomings.

The Candidate Countries NORTH MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO*, ALBANIA*, and BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA*, and the EFTA country ICELAND, member of the European Economic Area, align themselves with this statement.

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