

## Online Conference on Safety of Journalists

**Welcome Address by Dunja Mijatović**  
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

14 October 2020

Ten years ago, I received a phone call from Strasbourg, just a few months after I had taken up office as the new OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. On the other end of the line was Thomas Hammarberg, who back then was holding the position I hold today. He told me he was working on a publication on media freedom and he wanted me to contribute with a piece on the safety of journalists. I remember I was very nervous, but I accepted without the slightest hesitation. I was indeed deeply convinced that this issue had reached a pivotal point.

I read the publication over the last few days and was struck by how topical it is still today. Reading the names of murdered journalists in that book was a saddening exercise. Let's recall some of them aloud: Anna Politkovskaya, Dmitry Kholodov, Ivan Safronov, Natalya Skryl, Valery Ivanov, Georgiy Gongadze, Vasil Klymentyev, Elmar Huseynov, Slavko Ćuruvija, Milan Pantić, Ivo Pukanić, Niko Franjić, Hrant Dink.

The list was not exhaustive of course. Others had been killed in Europe and beyond.

Where are we today? In no better a situation, I am afraid. Things are probably even worse. The list of journalists killed in connection with their reporting has grown rapidly. Pavel Sheremet, Stan Storimans, Luka Popov, Timur Kuashev, Maksim Borodin and Denis Suvorov are just some of the many journalists killed in European countries over the past 10 years. For a long time, these killings happened outside the EU. But the massacre at the Charlie Hebdo newsroom and the killings of Łukasz Masiak, Kim Wall, Daphne Caruana Galizia, Ján Kuciak and Lyra McKee have opened EU countries' eyes, giving the lie to the grand illusion that the safety of journalists is not their problem.

That the press is oppressed is no news, unfortunately. And it is a global problem with far-reaching consequences. Acts of intimidation and reprisal, muzzling legislation and specious lawsuits endanger journalists and restrict the free, pluralist flow of information that is so vital for democracies. More worryingly, widespread impunity for crimes against journalists represents an admission of powerlessness by states which merely emboldens those who want to kill the truth.

Last month, Salome Gongadze, the daughter of Georgiy, the cofounder of *Ukrainskaya Pravda*, wrote a passionate and damning opinion piece for the *New Statesman*. Twenty years after the abduction and death of her father, the perpetrators and masterminds are still free.

Regrettably this is the case for so many journalists killed in Europe. Three years have passed and no truth or justice is in sight for the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia. And the recent court decision in the Slovak Republic acquitting the alleged mastermind of the murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová shows how difficult it is still to secure justice for journalists.

But I am not here to tell you what you already know. I am here to thank you. Because you are stronger than those who want to scare you. Because your search for justice does not bow to those who want to destroy your resolve. I am here to thank you because through your work, through your relentless search for justice and accountability, you are serving the public good. It is not just for you that you are demanding justice. You are demanding it for all of us, to protect the human rights of all of us.

On paper, these rights exist. Press freedom is enshrined both in national and international laws. The case-law of the European Court of Human Rights grants the broadest possible protection to the press, and international organisations have adopted a vast array of standards, including the 2016 Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors.

But all these texts, all these standards remain a scrap of paper unless the climate of impunity which surrounds the countless assaults on journalists and fuels further threats and attacks is not tackled. Regrettably, I do not see a real desire on the part of political leaders to do so.

Yet, this is a fundamental step to take. Democracy, human rights and the rule of law cannot flourish if there is hostility against journalists. When you are unsafe – and this happens every day – it is not only media freedom which suffers, but also the very functioning of democratic societies, the daily exercise of citizens' rights and freedoms. This is a vicious circle from which it is difficult, although not impossible, to escape.

As you know, in my previous functions and today as Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, I have devoted a great deal of my efforts to persuading member states to confront these problems. They have tools and practices in place. I would like them to be more active in implementing them and sharing the good practices that exist to protect journalists.

The tragic sequence of murders of journalists in Europe and the many threats they are facing must become a call for action. I will add my voice to yours to demand that European states uphold their duty to protect journalists.

The cartoons you see behind me were drawn by Plantu, Chapatte and many other cartoonists from all over the world whose life is often endangered. They serve as a reminder, every day I come to the office, that without safe and free journalists we are deprived of our right to receive information, we are deprived of informed public debate and we cannot have a properly functioning democracy. The fight for a safe and free press must become a concern for all, not only for journalists.

I am in awe of your courage, dedication and determination. It can only be a source of motivation and make me feel an additional responsibility to try to do everything I can to support you.

You can count on me to continue to raise the issue of the safety of journalists at the highest political levels so that it receives the priority attention it deserves.