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Good afternoon to you all. I am pleased to join my distinguished fellow panelists and take part in this important discussion. I thank the Representative of the Freedom of the Media for her kind invitation and for giving me the pleasure to speak before such a distinguished audience.

At the outset let me start by saying that the notion that there can be no true security without media freedom is fundamental to a healthy, functioning democracy.

Free media acts as a watchdog over government actions, ensuring transparency and accountability. This is fundamental to preventing abuses of power and fostering trust in public institutions.

Media provide the public with essential information on issues affecting their safety and security, from health crises to environmental hazards to challenging regional disputes and conflicts.

Adverse Impacts of Media Restrictions on Security

1. Threat to Democracy

- Free media is essential for informed citizenry and robust democratic processes.

- When media freedom is suppressed, democratic processes suffer, leading to increased political instability and conflict.

   2. Lack of accountability

- Without a free press, governments may operate without accountability, leading to potential abuses of power and human rights violations. Such actions can incite unrest and conflict.

 - Investigative Journalism within the free media environment plays a critical role in exposing wrongdoings in the system and holding power accountable.

- restrictions on media lead to impunity and weakened institutions and governance, and often result in the suppression of vital information. This can hinder effective responses to crises such as natural disasters, pandemics, or security threats, endangering public safety.

3. Erosion of Public Trust

 - Restricting media often leads to a vacuum filled by state propaganda and misinformation.

 - This undermines public trust in institutions and destabilises societies, making it easier for malicious actors to exploit these vulnerabilities.

 - Media freedom allows for diverse viewpoints and public discourse, essential for resolving conflicts and addressing grievances. Restrictions lead to a polarised society where issues fester and escalate into larger security threats.

4. Economic Impacts:

 - Restrictions on media freedom can also deter investment, as investors seek stable, transparent environments. Economic decline can further deepen social tensions and create security issues.

5. Transnational Nature/Exacerbation of Regional Instability

- Media restrictions in one country can have a ripple effect, destabilising neighbouring regions and contributing to broader regional insecurity.

- Local journalism in fostering social cohesion and political participation is important. The collapse of local news outlets leads to 'news deserts' and weakens community resilience.

- The independence and sustainability of public service media in providing unbiased information is vital for democracy.

- That is why independent media should be supported through legal protections, financial sustainability, and resisting undue interference.

Having said this we need to recognise the fact that traditional concepts of media (also known as legacy media) are grappling with existential crises, including of an economic nature.

The business models that have endured for a long time are now being put in question and more and more audiences are switching to digital sources and free information. Local media are particularly affected, with many already entirely diminished.

Digitalisation and social media, despite a clear positive potential, have challenged the media landscape enormously in the past decades, and to some respect blurred divisions between the public and private spheres of communication. Online platforms have become gatekeepers, shaping and arbitrating our online information spaces, including in manipulative ways that undermine public interest.

The free flow of information is essential at all times, but it becomes especially vital in times of conflict. It is often said that the first casualty of war is truth. In the digital age, such conflict takes on many additional layers of a hybrid nature, with government-led or induced influence operations and vicious online censorship.

The widespread use of internet and its applications has had many good effects, but there are also many negative trends undermining the valuable role of the media. This impact includes disinformation and propaganda. It also includes deliberate tactics aimed at targeting journalists in their watchdog function and at using media for disrupting peace, security and stability.

Journalism is difficult work at the best of times. In a conflict situation, journalists face even greater difficulties. They operate in a climate of fear for their lives, and under pressure, often with opposing sides seeking to control

the narrative. In such circumstances journalism is even more important. Independent media ensure the world remains informed with accurate information, reporting on human rights violations and war crimes.

It can also contribute to conflict reduction and resolution by gathering and disseminating impartial and accurate information.

In the digital age, democratic societies are confronted with an insidious adversary—FIMI, foreign information manipulation and interference, also often labelled as disinformation. FIMI is a pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures, and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Disinformation is the deliberate creation and dissemination of false and manipulated information with the intend to deceive or mislead.

Behind such activities the perpetrators can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory. Waves of deliberately misleading information, strategically disseminated, pose a significant threat to the very foundations of democratic governance and security.

While **counter-disinformation activities** often look at the content, by tackling narratives, the definition of FIMI shifts the focus from content to behavior, as intentional information manipulation constitutes FIMI. Eventually, to better develop effective countermeasures, the phenomenon pushes us to consider state-sponsored manipulations of information in a new light, at the crossroads of influence operations that go hand in hand with cyber-attacks and hybrid tactics. **In dealing with this menace effectively, fostering societal resilience becomes imperative. For that to be achieved:**

1. Understanding FIMI/Disinformation:

   To counter disinformation, societies must first comprehend its multifaceted nature. Recognising the tactics employed by malicious actors is essential in devising effective resilience strategies.

2. Media Literacy as a Shield:

Media and information literacy empowers individuals to critically evaluate information sources, discern biases, and differentiate between credible and misleading content. Integrating comprehensive media and information literacy programs into educational curricula equips citizens from their earlier age with the skills needed to navigate the complex digital landscape.

3. Fact-Checking Processes:

Establishing rigorous fact-checking mechanisms is indispensable in the fight against disinformation. Fact-checking conducted by independent organisations play a crucial role in verifying the accuracy of information, holding media outlets accountable, and debunking false narratives.

4. Collaboration and Information Sharing:

A united front is essential in countering disinformation. Collaborative efforts between government agencies, international organisations, media corporations, technology platforms and stakeholders from academia and private sector can facilitate the swift identification and mitigation of FIMI campaigns. Open communication channels for sharing threat assessments are vital in this regard.

5. Regulatory Frameworks:

Governments need to implement and enforce robust regulatory frameworks that address the spread of disinformation without compromising freedom of speech.

6. Technology as a Double-Edged Sword:

While technology facilitates the spread of disinformation, it can also be harnessed to counter it. Developing advanced algorithms and artificial intelligence tools to detect and mitigate disinformation is crucial. Responsible use of technology can bolster societal defences against manipulation.

How to engage?

The question of engagement is of critical nature while trying to solidify the sense of attachment to those commitments enshrined in the OSCE documents insofar as media freedom is concerned.

There are a number of case studies from the past and current times that we can dwell upon. The important thing is to be able to draw lessons from those case studies and take best practices to improve the performance of each and every pS of the OSCE. Positive examples from OSCE participating States where media freedom has contributed to transparency, accountability, and stability can be conducive to a better understanding regarding what could be done to improve performances of individual pS in this respect.

The OSCE has long championed media freedom as a cornerstone of its comprehensive security model. Upholding these commitments is essential for maintaining regional stability and fostering cooperation.

Needless to say, the importance of OSCE support mechanisms for media freedom, including the Representative on Freedom of the Media is evident. Participating States should be encouraged to fully utilise these resources.

A genuine dialogue needs to be conducted with pS concerned rather than utilising the "naming and shaming exercise" with the aim of scoring points for domestic audiences as the only means of engagement. The latter strengthens the sense of alienation with the pS authorities concerned and leads to resistance to any possible positive change.

In concluding, let me stress that our shared commitment to upholding media freedom is crucial for ensuring lasting peace and stability across the OSCE region.