



## **30<sup>TH</sup> BSPC: SECOND SESSION**

Democracy in a changing media landscape

Speaker: ***Ms Margareta Cederfelt***, *President, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA)*

- reported speech -

Ms Cederfelt began by stating it was a pleasure to be invited to this Conference as it was with friends in the Nordic, Baltic countries all around the eastern sea. This session's topic was something that was truly of concern to all of them, not only as parliamentarians but also as members of society. She wished to go a bit beyond the Baltic Sea region. Ms Cederfelt believed that the tragic events in Kabul, Afghanistan, over recent days and weeks truly put into perspective how media were perceived and consumed. She asked her audience to remember that twenty years earlier, the 9/11 terrorist attacks were the first ones to be televised live as they had happened. Footage from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had mainly come from embedded journalists. Today, though, everyone with access to a phone and the internet could be a media producer, and footage from terrorist attacks was appearing on their devices within minutes, sometimes seconds. All of them had witnessed how people had taken videos, using their cell phones, of tragic accidents around the world. While world events had traditionally been covered by established news organisations, independent agencies and journalists had sprung up to offer new points of view. Extremist movements, such as the Taliban, had also understood these means to build up narratives to assert control. Often, these meant that opposing sides would have their own truths.

As had been seen in recent years, the rise of disinformation in western democracy offered major challenges to democratic institutions. While this had occurred in Europe and America, it was a growing trend in European politics. As part of the OSCE work to observe elections, for example, they had integrated the monitoring of social media for some years. They had seen that social media had a higher impact on democracy which was the reason for them including it. In addition, the OSCE had also monitored traditional media for a very long time. For example, they had looked at the time that the different candidates had access to the media but also who owned the media. That was also of interest. Another area of concern was who was using the media – was it the majority, was it the opposition, or was it somebody else? This, Ms Cederfelt emphasised, also had an impact on democracy. More and more findings would point out the negative impact of disinformation on electoral campaigns. In her view, politicians had to keep this in mind, both in how they communicated but also regarding the threat to democracy. Nevertheless, she did not wish to sound pessimistic because those developments also provided possibilities. Debates had been becoming more and more polarised, and political contestants were becoming victims of personal attacks. That had been seen in Sweden but also in other countries as well. In the end, there were fewer opportunities for in-depth analyses and political compromise.

However, it was necessary to remember that fake news and propaganda had been around for as long as human beings had been on earth. It was just the degree of monitoring that varied. What made it seem such a new phenomenon was the immediacy provided by the mobile technology. Ms Cederfelt, just as her listeners, was using social media and considered it a very good way to communicate. Nonetheless, there was also the hate speech and the lack of an auditor. She believed it was a fantastic tool that they should be using, also to communicate with their constituency. Moreover, there was the possibility of using the internet for conferences, such as this day's. She noted that the BSPC had spent a lot of time during the COVID-19 pandemic on the web. Without the web, it would not have been possible to have this communication.

Easy access to information was a very positive development, and Ms Cederfelt mentioned the internet had helped the opposition in Belarus to organise and gain strength since the preceding summer. She had noticed it by herself when visiting Belarus. She had last been there in 2019, and it had been a totally different society from what it had been just two years before that, in 2017. That had been thanks to the internet and the possibilities it offered. While the ease of access had empowered citizens to move towards online platforms, it had also undermined traditional media as a pillar of the democratic society. She believed the key here was to bridge the gap between reliable information and plain propaganda. This called on politicians to take steps to better educate the wider public to become more media-literate and resilient to disinformation. Within the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, her special representative on disinformation and propaganda worked to establish some degree of regulatory governance. For instance, they wanted to promote high-quality political journalism to be strong and independent public broadcasters. It was necessary to work together towards developing better norms and standards applying equally to traditional and digital platforms. It was equally necessary to make sure that throughout the OSCE region, legislation was implemented to guarantee freedom of expression and freedom of the media.

During the pandemic but also all over the world, Ms Cederfelt saw that the freedom of speech was stricken just as well the freedom of media. On all these issues, they continued to work in synergy with the OSCE representative on freedom of the media, the OSCE chairpersonship and the other OSCE structures to ensure the compliance of all participating states with the commitments to respect the freedom of expression and the free media. The OSCE PA was also eager to deepen their partnership with civil society and media organisations and all institutions adhering to these principles. But as politicians, they also should consider the role they were playing. She knew herself that it was not easy to react to an event with 280 characters in a tweet. Perhaps sometimes, it would be beneficial to think beyond their next tweet to focus on ways to reinforce democracy in these troubled times.

Ms Cederfelt thanked the BSPC for their attention and was looking forward to their thoughts on this topic.