



**HIGH-LEVEL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
ON THE DANGERS OF DISINFORMATION**

**OPENING REMARKS BY OSCE PA SECRETARY GENERAL
MR. ROBERTO MONTELLA**

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Minister Renzi,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, let me thank the Ministry for Foreign and Political Affairs of the Republic of San Marino for organizing this important and timely conference as well as for kindly inviting me to address its opening session. It is an honour to be here and to join my remarks to the eminent voices of UN Secretary General Guterres and Council of Europe Secretary General Jagland.

A few months ago, together with George Tsereteli, President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, I paid an official visit to the Republic of San Marino. On that occasion, among the broad array of topics discussed, which by the way included the issue of fake news, we made it clear that the importance of a country is not defined by its dimensions, and that the OSCE PA values the contributions of all its participating States alike. This event today proves our words quite significantly.

I do not want to take away time from the real experts on this topic and I will therefore limit myself to two short points: what is the challenge we are facing and what is my Organization, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, doing to address the issue.

While fake news are not a new phenomenon, modern technologies and social media are having a multiplier effect on its spread. This is indeed one of the “side effects” of the digital revolution. It is not only affecting the reliability of information *per se*, but it is also increasingly affecting the public perception of key matters of domestic and international politics. OSCE PA President Tsereteli spoke out very clearly on this a few months ago saying that *the instrumentalization of fake news as a strategic political tool clearly poses a serious danger to democracy and its core values*, and that, *to put it simply, there is no democracy without good journalism*.¹ Unfortunately, this is not an overstatement or an exaggeration. Fake news is invading the media environment, resulting in an erosion of confidence, polarization of politics and widespread confusion on important matters.

Clearly, the big question we have to answer is how to protect ourselves from disinformation. It is a challenging issue because we also have a legal and moral obligation not to compromise on freedom of expression and on freedom of the media. Striking the right balance between these freedoms and the fight against disinformation can indeed be very hard, but in no way censoring fake news can be the right answer. It would only throw us into a vortex of other, possibly bigger, problems.

¹ Address of OSCE PA President Tsereteli, OSCE RFoM 15th South Caucasus Media Conference, Tbilisi, July 2018

What is the right answer then? Being in San Marino, I would like to quote my esteemed colleague Elena Molaroni, Ambassador of San Marino to the OSCE, in her statement at the last OSCE Ministerial Council in Milan. She said: *disinformation is a poison that pollutes the wells of our communities. A flow of fresh and clean water is essential for addressing the major challenges on the international geopolitical scene.*² This metaphor says it all, as the answer mostly lays in good information, in “pouring fresh and clean water” in the media environment. However, the challenge is not only about providing accurate news, rather about creating a “culture” and positive environment for good information to spread. Only by granting this space we will prevent fake news from circulating.

How can we do all of this more practically? There is no need to reinvent the wheel, as we actually already have frameworks for action. I will now mention just one, notably the *Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Fake News, Disinformation and Propaganda*, presented in 2017 by the UN, the OSCE, the OAS and ACHPR. This declaration calls upon policy makers to, inter alia, (1) promote a free, independent and diverse communication environment and media diversity, (2) protect and support strong and independent public broadcasters, (3) promote transparency, (4) develop programmes on media literacy and education in schools, (5) foster more stringent regulatory guidelines and (6) establish oversight bodies for public media. These are just a few examples of possible actions. Of course, we now need to turn proposals and declarations into practice. In this regard, parliamentarians and parliamentary diplomacy can do a lot.

² Statement of San Marino to the 2019 OSCE Ministerial Conference, Milan, December 2018.

This necessarily brings me to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. As you know, the main objective of the OSCE PA is to complement the activities of the OSCE by providing that specific added value that rests in the hands of parliamentarians, national parliaments and inter-parliamentary diplomacy. In particular, the PA seeks to offer a platform for dialogue, to facilitate legislative initiative and to provide parliamentary oversight on the implementation of OSCE principles and commitments.

On this topic, our first and natural point of reference is the great work undertaken by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM), whose mandate is unique in the spectrum of international organizations. I am glad that Mr. Andrei Richter, advisor to the RFoM, is here with us today and I very much look forward to hearing from him in a few minutes, and perhaps also learn how parliamentarians can further help on this issue.

The OSCE PA's Committee on Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions has extensively discussed the topic of fake news in the last years. Building on such useful debates, and underscoring the need to take more concrete action, the Assembly made clear reference to the issue in its 2018 Berlin Declaration, calling upon our parliamentarians *to co-operate with news outlets to counteract misinformation and fake news*, as well as to *promote media and digital literacy and develop educational tools and outreach strategies in conjunction with civil society in order to increase resistance to the spread of disinformation*. The resolution also encourages the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media *to continue to provide guidelines and support on addressing fake news and propaganda*.

I see our parliamentarians very much engaged on this topic – in fact they are painfully aware of its importance as they often suffer from fake news themselves! – and I am confident that the issue of disinformation will be further discussed during our upcoming meetings, including the PA Annual Session in Luxembourg in July. Our members are also committed to work at home in their national parliaments to advance legislation and to take action to implement our resolutions. I will be glad to send them the outcomes of this conference as additional food-for-thought to stimulate further action.

In conclusion, please rest assured that the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly will continue to keep the topic high on its agenda and stands ready to fully cooperate to strengthen efforts, both within and outside the OSCE framework, aimed at countering disinformation and fake news. It is a matter of democracy and we want to play our role to defend it.

I once again thank you for organizing this important conference and look forward to an interesting and fruitful debate. Thank you!