



OPEN LETTER
BY OSCE PA SECRETARY GENERAL ROBERTO MONTELLA
ON THE 20th ANNIVERSARY OF THE MURDER OF SHEFKI POPOVA

Copenhagen, 10 September 2020

Dear Turkane, Albina, Dafina and Dijari Popova,

It is with the most vivid memory of your husband and father, my dear friend Shefki, that I am writing you today, on the 20th anniversary of his brutal assassination, to share with you the grief and the sadness that continue to live in me since that terrible night of 10 September 2000 in Vushtri/Vucitrn.

It's exactly in Vushtri/Vucitrn that Shefki and I met for the first time, not even a year before. I had been posted there as young democratization officer for the local field office of the OSCE, and he was the correspondent of the newspaper Rilindja in the town. We met in what were very challenging times, just 4 months after the 1999 war and in a highly tense social and political atmosphere.

In your father, I saw first of all a man of strong principles who wanted peace for his land and his people. I had the opportunity to admire his professional skills, which made him a respected journalist, reliable and careful to reporting the truth. A journalist that saw his work as a service to the community, rather than just a job. Shefki loved his job, his people and life. We became friends, because we shared the same way of living life.

Shefki has been instrumental for me to learn and understand about Vushtri/Vucitrn, the entire area covered by the OSCE Mission and the wonderful people of your land. His network and his knowledge allowed me and the rest of the international community to understand where we were and what we were doing, and to introduce me to all the local stakeholders. From him I actually also learned a universal principle that should guide any international agent, wherever in the world: when you are posted abroad, you have to listen, learn and understand. The international community is not a superior body that tells people what to do. It is there to help and support.

For a short period, and actually up to two days before his murder, we also managed to work together, as the OSCE had employed him to help assist a voter education project, on the way towards important post-conflict elections. I will always remember his passionate dedication and impartial support. Unfortunately, however, politics are sometimes poisoned and for his enemies, or better to say for the enemies of his ideas, this close cooperation with the OSCE was not appreciated.

When a journalist is killed, it is not only his or her soul to perish, but also the freedom of expression of all of us. Moreover, and with particular emphasis on conflict or post-conflict

situations, we say that “*during a war, truth is the first casualty*”, so we must protect those who are committed to keep such a truth alive.

This brings me to today, because Shefki was certainly not the last journalist to be killed and too many of his colleagues continue to suffer from violence and intimidations because of what they report. We are witnessing this even today, including in the OSCE region.

The OSCE has always been at the forefront in the fight for the protection of journalists. One of its autonomous institutions, the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM), has a very unique mandate in the vast spectrum of international bodies and organizations. It is a topic that is central to the comprehensive concept of security which the Organization promotes, a concept focused on human security, in which freedom of expression is a milestone for peace and security.

The OSCE acquis on protection of journalists is consistent and dates back up to the 1975 Helsinki Final Act. I'll just mention here the last relevant framework Ministerial Decision adopted during the Italian Chairmanship of the OSCE (3/18 on Safety of Journalists)¹, in 2018. It calls on States to, *inter alia, bring their laws, policies and practices, pertaining to media freedom, fully in compliance with their international obligations and commitments and to review and, where necessary, repeal or amend them so that they do not limit the ability of journalists to perform their work independently and without undue interference; and to condemn publicly and unequivocally all attacks and violence against journalists such as killing, torture, enforced disappearance, arbitrary arrest, arbitrary detention and arbitrary expulsion, intimidation, harassment, and threats of all forms, such as physical, legal, political, technological or economic, used to suppress their work and/or unduly force closure of their offices, including in conflict situations.*

Of course, while defending journalists is essential, we must also fight the spreading phenomenon of disinformation and fake news, which is finding in the internet and new technologies more ground to grow. However, censorship is never the answer and in no way the pretext of fighting disinformation can be used to limit the work of journalists. It may sound odd at first, but the tool to protect journalists and at the same time fight disinformation is the same: fostering a healthy media environment. If it is easy to report the truth, fake news will have a harder time to spread.

These are principles on which our society is based on and we must work tirelessly to promote and protect them.

For Shefki, for his colleagues.

With deepest and unchanged respect,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Roberto Montella". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Roberto Montella
Secretary General

¹ <https://www.osce.org/files/mcdec0003%20safety%20of%20journalists%20en.pdf>