



Hügelgasse 2, A-1130, Wien | Tel.: + 43 (1) 403 13 22 | Fax: + 43 (1) 403 13 23 | E-mail: vienna@mission.mfa.gov.az

Statement by the Delegation of the Republic of Azerbaijan
1287th Meeting of the Permanent Council
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*Hate speech and intimidation against journalists
in France reporting on Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict*

Mr. Chairperson,

Azerbaijan would like to draw the attention of the Permanent Council to the issue of pressure and intimidation against the journalist of the French television channel TF1 Liseron Boudoul, who recently visited the frontline and prepared a report on Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict broadcasted on 22 October 2020 on TF1 TV-channel.

The Armenian community in France has unleashed a barrage of insults and threats against Ms. Boudoul and the French TF1 television channel, including on social networks, only because she reported on the civilian casualties at the result of the Armenian missile strikes on Ganja and civilian infrastructure. Thus, on 22 October 2020, Co-chair of the Council of Armenian Organizations of France Murad Papazian called for massive protests against the TF1 and its correspondent L.Boudoul. Others called to boycott the TV channel and to organize rallies outside its office. Some Armenian lobby activists proposed on social networks to resume the activities of the terrorist group ASALA in Paris, to kill the journalist L.Boudoul and to “behead the high-ranking staff” of TF1. After these threats, on 23 October 2020, the channel had to remove the link to the report from its website. Protests against the channel are continuing to date. Such threats have no place in a democratic society.

The Reporters Without Borders (RFS) firmly condemned the pressure and harassment exerted against the French journalist and TF1 media outlet. Moreover, the Head of RFS’s European Union and Balkans Desk, Mr. Pavol Szalai stated that “[i]t is unacceptable for a journalist and a media outlet to be hounded in this way for covering a conflict, on the grounds that they placed themselves on a certain side of the front line” and also called on “Murad Papazian, the co-chair of the Coordinating Council of Armenia Organization in France, to unequivocally condemn this grave attack on freedom of the press”.

In a separate incident, on 27 October 2020, the Armenian armed forces in gross violation of international humanitarian law deliberately attacked with anti-tank guided missile a civilian vehicle with clear distinctive signs carrying France-based Euronews TV channel crew. The journalists survived just by mere luck.

Freedom of the press and media are among the basic prerequisites for truly democratic societies as reflected in the OSCE commitments starting from the Helsinki Final Act. Participating States must

ensure an appropriate environment in which media professionals will be able to perform their work without fear of being harassed or threatened. This is particularly important in situations of armed conflicts. The participating States pledged in Copenhagen to adopt all feasible measures to protect journalists engaged in dangerous professional missions, particularly in cases of armed conflict, and will co-operate to that effect.

Furthermore, OSCE Ministerial Council decision on the Safety of Journalists adopted in Milan in 2018, stipulates that participating States should condemn publicly and unequivocally attacks on women journalists in relation to their work, such as sexual harassment, abuse, intimidation, threats and violence, including through digital technologies. The participating States and their authorities are called to enable safe working conditions and ensure safety of journalists by, inter alia, bringing to justice all those responsible for threats or crimes against journalists.

While staying on this subject, we would like to reiterate that under international humanitarian law, and in accordance with the UN Security Council resolutions 1738 (2006) and 2222 (2015), journalists in armed conflicts are classified as civilians, and as such should be afforded the same protection as applicable to civilians, provided that they take no action adversely affecting their status as civilians. In this regard, it is of crucial importance that all journalists, media professionals and associated personnel to exercise maximum care and avoid any action that would undermine their status as a civilian in the conflict zone. We received alarming reports that some of the Armenian journalists reporting from the conflict zone wear military uniform and carry machine-guns, which adversely affects their status as civilians. We deplore that Armenia fails to implement its obligations under international humanitarian law to take all feasible precautions to protect the civilians, including journalists under its control by clearly distinguishing them from the combatants. In so doing, Armenia puts the safety and security of journalists operating in the conflict zone at risk with the obvious purpose of exploiting possible casualties in its anti-Azerbaijan information campaign.

Azerbaijan has repeatedly called RFoM to observe relevant media developments in all participating States without exception or political or geographic preferences. On this basis, RFoM should advocate and promote full compliance with OSCE principles and commitments regarding freedom of expression and free media in a comprehensive, objective and impartial manner in full compliance with its Mandate. Unfortunately, we have not seen thus far any reaction from the Office of RFoM on these cases. Temporary vacancy of the position of Representative should not hinder the functioning of this Office. We expect a proper reaction from the RFoM within its Mandate on the threat against the French journalists that constitute a serious violation of other OSCE principles and commitments.

The above-mentioned incident highlighted the specific risks faced by women journalists, media professionals and associated personnel in conduct of their work. The UN Security Council resolution 2222 (2015) on protection of journalists specifically underlined the importance of considering the gender dimension of measures to address safety of journalists reporting on situations of armed conflict.

Those participating States that affirm that the work of a free, independent and impartial media constitutes one of the essential foundations of a democratic society must condemn all violations and abuses committed against journalists, media professionals and associated personnel, especially in situations of armed conflict. We call on France to conduct of impartial, independent and effective investigation into the above-mentioned case and to hold those directly responsible for such attacks and harassment accountable.

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson.