

Speak Up! Conference Conclusions and Recommendations by the Chair

The "Speak Up!" conference on Freedom of Expression and Media in the Western Balkans and Turkey brought together over 400 media professionals from the region and the European Union. The conference addressed one of the fundamental challenges facing any country, that of ensuring freedom of expression and of the media and was held in the context of increasing concerns over a worrying situation in this field in a number of countries in the region.

I. Some clear orientations emerged.

- a) Ensuring freedom of expression is a challenge facing EU and enlargement countries alike: Freedom of expression is one of the key elements of a country's maturity to become a member state. It implies a commitment to pluralistic democracy, good governance and political accountability.
- b) Every candidate and potential candidate must ensure that it guarantees Freedom of expression if its membership aspirations are to be fulfilled. Working in this direction is the essence of the accession process
- c) The main challenges to freedom of expression and media in the Western Balkans and Turkey are: political interference including through the legal system; economic challenges "including issues" of ownership and lack of competition; illegal harassment, including violence against journalists
- d) By working together the EU, international organisations, national governments, media and journalist organisations can create an environment in which our shared values are respected, European aspirations can be fulfilled and citizens have access to a wide range of information, analysis and opinion.

II. There was broad agreement that the following issues need to be addressed:

- a) Implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights, notably article 10 on media freedom.
- b) Prosecution of those who have attacked or threatened journalists (in an attempt to restrict press freedom and investigative journalism.)
- c) Strengthening the legal framework, through a review of legislation which affects the media's ability to report freely, including anti-terrorism laws.
- d) Revision of defamation laws and its decriminalisation; to guard against defamation is acceptable, criminalisation is not.
- e) Transparency of media ownership and limits to media concentration to secure media pluralism.
- f) Independence of media and media market regulators.
- g) Independence of public broadcasters both politically and financially.
- h) How best to promote quality reporting while ensuring and respecting the freedom of the media
- i) Establishment of guidelines on ethics in journalism (ethical code) and increasing the professionalism of journalists.

- j) Regional cooperation between journalist organisations, self-regulatory bodies and watchdog NGOs to share best practices and expertise and establish solidarity between them.

III. Following the Conference discussion and reflecting requests made, the European Commission will:

- Ensure that freedom of expression is a priority in the EU accession process at all levels:
 - a. Use agreements and structured dialogues with the enlargement countries to monitor developments, identify priorities and support government efforts to reach European standards.
 - b. Strengthen co-operation with the relevant international and regional organisations - in particular the Council of Europe and the OSCE - and other bilateral donors both in headquarters and on the ground.
 - c. The EU Delegations in the candidate and potential candidate countries will continue and intensify the dialogue with the governments and journalists and their associations.
 - d. Emphasise freedom of expression in its annual progress reports, as well as in the recommendations of the Strategy paper.
 - e. Give further consideration to freedom of expression issues within Chapter 23 (*Fundamental rights and Freedoms*) of accession talks.
 - f. Enhance consultations with national and regional media organisations, civil society organisations and other non-governmental actors from the enlargement countries.
- Set up a dedicated financial and technical assistance programme ("Freedom of expression and media programme) whose aim will be to support implementation of the key principles of freedom of expression and media in close association with partners in the media sector, civil society and other relevant stakeholders.

These funds will address the specific needs of the different stakeholders' groups. Needs suggested by the Conference include:

- a. Grants to facilitate networking, by dissemination of best practices, regional cooperation and solidarity
- b. Assistance to develop advocacy and lobbying capacities of journalist organisations and watchdog NGOs
- c. Long term advice and support by the counterparts in the EU to, notably, self-regulatory bodies and media market regulators
- d. Continuous legal training for journalists, prosecutors and judges

- e. Support the tradition of the journalist inquiry and creation of training opportunities for a new generation of investigative journalists.

The conference clearly demonstrated the value that could be created when journalists, their organisations, media experts from the European Union and the enlargement countries are brought together. The conference has helped deepen existing contacts and create new ones. We would encourage these to be built on as needed. Our work will profit from coming together in the conference framework again.