



EU ENLARGEMENT

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SPEAKING OUT: THE EU SUPPORTS FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN ENLARGEMENT COUNTRIES

"A free, independent and vibrant press is indispensable in any democratic society", said the EU's High Representative, Catherine Ashton, on May 3 2013 - the day that marked the 20th anniversary of World Press Freedom Day. The emphasis on media freedom is mirrored in the EU's approach to enlargement. With good reason. Freedom of expression is a fundamental right, and democracy cannot function properly without it. Independent media are vital watchdogs of the political system. So the EU makes sure that any new member states have political systems that respect the EU's values - and that means making sure they have the right conditions for a healthy media.

This is why the EU carries out detailed and regular checks on media freedom in the countries wishing to join. Some of the checks are based on how far EU requirements are already being met - such as impartiality and independence of regulatory authorities in the broadcasting sector.

IT DOESN'T HAPPEN BY ACCIDENT

Life isn't easy for the media in many of the enlargement countries. Threats have been made repeatedly against journalists in Kosovo*, where there are frequent violations of media freedom ranging from intimidation by police to death threats.

Pressure is often exerted by the authorities, both directly through court action to limit freedom of expression - as in the sentencing of Fazil Say, a prominent Turkish pianist, for comments he posted on Twitter - and indirectly on publishers - as in the case of the Milliyet newspaper, which made an

agreement not to carry articles by the critical Turkish columnist Hasan Cemal.



"What is free media?" asked Željko Ivanovic, CEO of the Vijesti newspaper in Podgorica, Montenegro, at an EU seminar on freedom of expression and media in the Western Balkans and Turkey in May 2011. "It tries to defend the right and speak the truth and remain free of political influence, fighting for truth against state propaganda and the 'patriotic' journalism of the last 20 years in this region. It tries to defend the rule of law and individual rights [...]. Free media are more common in countries where governments fight organised crime and corruption [...]. The role that the EU plays in this is very important, and so are its critical reports."

Fair market rules leave less room for informal pressures. Political independence remains an issue to be addressed by media market regulators.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/99 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

THE EU IS TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

The EU expects the authorities in the enlargement countries to do more to ensure media freedom. An immediate objective is the decriminalisation of defamation. Training seminars for civil servants and media practitioners have also been run in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Montenegro and are being extended to Turkey and across the other countries.

On-the-ground work with media and civil society takes place to encourage and support stronger and more independent journalism. A specific media component has been added to the EU's programme for civil society support in the enlargement countries. An EU conference dedicated to media freedom in the enlargement countries - the 'Speak-Up Conference' - brought together journalists, editors and publishers, and identified needs for support to networking and regional cooperation, assistance in developing the advocacy and lobbying capacities of journalist organisations and watchdog NGOs, advice to media market regulators, and backing and training for the tradition of journalist inquiry.

Through the EU's special pre-accession funding instrument (IPA, Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance), finance is provided to organisations such as the South East Europe Media Organisation, an affiliate of the International Press Institute, which monitors press freedom across the region, and to the Balkan Investigative Reporters Network (BIRN) to promote investigative reporting, particularly on

justice. The EU is backing a new Media Strategy for Serbia.

In addition, direct funding has been supplied in some cases where political priorities required it - such as in setting up a cooperation programme with the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) to promote reform of public service broadcasting. In Montenegro, for instance, the OSCE supports work by the EPP to develop a forward-looking strategy in cooperation with the EBU's member in Montenegro, RTCG.

POLITICAL REFORMS ARE BEARING FRUIT

Progress has been noticed. For example, strides have been made regarding the performance of the media regulator in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. BIRN has been able to expand its multi-language, multimedia news and analysis - with more than 4,000 republications of its articles by local media outlets across the region. In Serbia, the authorities have set up a commission to investigate cases of violence against media representatives and the country has also adopted a media development strategy.

However, more work still remains to be done. Although things are improving in many respects, the EU's most recent strategy document still notes that "strengthening freedom of expression and independence of the media remains a major challenge".