



MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
OF THE REPUBLIC OF LATVIA

# Opening address by H.E. Edgars Rinkēvičs Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia at the World Press Freedom Day conference

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Director General,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my honour and pleasure to open the World Press Freedom Day events in Latvia.

Thus, these are days of special importance for Latvia, and also for me personally. 25 years ago on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May Latvia regained independence after 50 long years of Soviet occupation. Remarkably, it was not our military force that destroyed the Soviet regime, but people's will. We wanted our freedom back, we wanted to live without fear of repression for thinking and expressing ourselves freely. Journalists, thinkers and writers played a crucial role in this process.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to all of you working in this very important and difficult profession. Let us remember media professionals who have lost their lives, and honour those who bring us information despite danger and risk.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The UN General Assembly at its very first session in 1946 adopted a resolution stating: "*Freedom of information is a fundamental human right and ... the touchstone of all the freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated.*" Thus it is not only a fundamental human right but also one that enables other rights to be protected and exercised.

The guarantee of this freedom has particular significance for the media. As key means of communication, the ability of the media to function independently is vital to freedom of expression but also to the ability of a society to function and survive.

For independent and quality journalism to thrive, it has to take place in a relatively safe environment and with sustainable long-term financing. It has to be constantly nurtured and never - taken for granted.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our ability to act as informed citizens of the world depends on media that can work freely and safely. More than 90% of all reported attacks against journalists remain unresolved.

Most journalists are killed in their own countries of origin. Impunity remains a key challenge. We must work to ensure that existing international standards for the protection of journalists are being implemented in practice.

Female journalists are particularly vulnerable, especially those reporting in conflict zones, and this demands special attention.

Furthermore, gender equality and women in media are themes of the conference that also goes hand-in-hand with Latvia's human rights priorities. These two topics are intrinsically interlinked – on the one hand, gender equality in any society gives an equal chance to work in media or any other business, on the other hand, women in media are a significant facilitating factor in development of a just society.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would also like to stress that critical thinking and information literacy are crucial in order to overcome propaganda and disinformation. Unfortunately, this phenomenon has become a serious security issue also in our part of the world. It is therefore vital that governments pursue policies that support high-quality investigative journalism and protect editorial independence.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Guaranteeing freedom of expression, both offline and online, and strengthening the independence of quality media are among priorities of the Latvia. We promote it as part of our Presidency of the Council of the European Union, and in international organizations, including at the UN where Latvia is a member of the Human Rights Council for the first time.

Latvia is actively involved in the cross-regional initiative called the Freedom Online Coalition and we strongly support the Digital Defenders Partnership which provides practical assistance to those who need it the most – journalists, bloggers, media organizations and human rights defenders who find themselves under attack. We also welcome UNESCO`s International Programme`s for the Development of Communication extensive range of projects worldwide and will make a voluntary contribution to the Programme.

In conclusion, I would like to express my strong and sincere hope that our common efforts, including the conference today, will contribute to media freedom in the world and will ensure that no journalist in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, off-line or online, is being sealed off from the rest of the world through a new iron curtain.

Free press is the backbone of sustainable democracy and development. It enables competition of ideas, enhances creativity and prosperity. Let the free press thrive!

I wish insightful and dynamic discussions in the course of this conference.

Thank you!

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