

1st Eastern Partnership Media Conference
ROLE OF MEDIA IN THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP
(20.05.2015)

Chairman's conclusions

The discussions at the conference clearly demonstrated the pivotal role that free and reliable media should play in the implementation of the goals of **the Eastern Partnership**. First of all, they are instrumental for effective communication of the spirit and objectives of the Partnership and they help avoid the misinterpretation of the Eastern Partnership as a project “imposed from above” with geopolitical connotations. Media plays a crucial role in state-building and modernisation in our partner countries: **good governance** in terms of transparency of politics and policy making, the fight against corruption and democratic oversight over the state and its institutions are not fully possible without a free, pluralistic and vibrant media landscape. All this implies closer engagement of the EU with partner countries on the issues of media freedom and development.

Moreover, the EU and almost the entire Partnership region are covered by the same freedom of expression standards – those set by the Council of Europe on the basis of the European Human Rights Convention. Therefore, partner countries sincerely aspiring to closer relations with EU should be helped to live up to these high standards.

The conference enabled the event chair– the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the EU – to formulate a set of priorities and tasks for the attention of national decision makers and those in EU member states and its institutions as well as the media community in the partner countries and EU.

- The authorities in the partner countries should pay the utmost attention to safety of journalists, and if violence occurs there is no place for impunity.
- Governments should refrain from using the instruments of the state (e.g. judiciary, penal or civil codes, restrictive media laws or even law enforcement structures) to target journalists and the media community, but rather engage in dialogue and leave space for self-regulation to address controversies involving critical journalists and media outlets.
- An overriding concern is transparency of media ownership, its concentration in hands of a few who are often branded as "oligarchs" with substantial interests outside impartial reporting. It is perceived as directly undermining media pluralism, unbiased reporting and democratic oversight of authorities and politics in general. Governments in partner countries should realise that controlled media is weak media which exposes society to outside manipulation. Therefore those in charge should support media resilience rather than attempt to control it. Legal checks against concentration of ownership in the media sector need to be put in place and the regulatory authorities supervising the sector should have a sufficient legal basis to act independently and professionally. Given the importance of a functioning and professional mass media sector for democracy, national legislation should provide for transparency regarding the media outlet owners/final beneficiaries.
- Legislation regulating the work of media and journalists should, without unnecessary restriction, primarily support sustainability of the industry and independent journalism rather than aspire to establishing control over them. These issues should be raised and discussed in the dialogue between the EU and the Partners within the framework of their contractual relationship.
- The steep decline of professional standards in mainstream media as a consequence of the recent economic crisis, subsequent dependency of media outlets on political circles and preferences of their owners, vulnerability to propaganda, and large segments of the audience moving to online and social media are a cause for serious concern. It poses the

question about how to restore quality journalism which would enjoy audience confidence. Likewise, it is essential for advancing critical thinking of people to bring the quality of professional journalism to "new media". The desired directions of activity include increased attention to education of journalists; their language training to escape dependency on one-sided sources of information in matters of EU and World politics; the placement of journalists from the EaP region in EU media outlets for on-the-job training. Regular study-trips of journalists from the partner countries to EU and its diverse member states are important to avoid simplified stereotypes about the partners on the EU side. Forming pro-active networks of journalists having received training in EU would not only be an asset for tackling complicated EU policy issues, but also for resisting disinformation and attempts of manipulation from outside. The fading divide between the mainstream and new media highlights the growing importance of freelance journalism; it should be supported (access to training activities, granting an appropriate status, etc.) in the context of promoting media content pluralism.

- Apart from funding for training of journalists allocated by the EU, its member states and other international and bilateral donors, new sources of financing to retain and increase quality journalism in difficult times should be found. Partner countries should consider devoting public money to sustain quality journalism, because alongside public broadcasting, analytical reporting or investigative journalism is a public service needed by the citizens. For the same purpose private, commercial sources should be mobilised, for instance from IT companies, telecoms and internet providers which often use products of journalism "free of charge".
- National efforts to reform and modernise public broadcasting to the level they can deliver real public media content deserve encouragement and support.
- It is increasingly difficult in nowadays "to make a living out of journalism"; that is even more valid in the partner countries. To this end, consideration should be given how to increase business management level at independent media outlets while retaining high professional and ethical standards; how to help them to move onto new platforms in recognition of the digital media revolution. Local and regional media – the segment most close to the everyday life of citizens - shouldn't be neglected when putting in place training and support programmes.
- A number of priority tasks identified during the conference discussion can be supported through EU instruments that have already been tested and could serve as a basis for moving to more ambitious media assistance in the EaP region.

Continued monitoring of the development of the media landscape in the region (including its exposure to outside pressures from disinformation and propaganda) is needed to steer the political guidance and assistance efforts.

It is of a direct interest of both the EU and the partners to continue with journalist training and, notably, to make it more effective by selecting trainees also from public broadcasters, commercial media outlets with a wider outreach; quality journalism products and correct and understandable messages about EU then would reach a wider audience; a group of the journalists whose working language is Russian should be covered by the training.

The journalists having received this training should form the core of a wider, open and proactive network to address the challenges of the European transformation of the countries, but also to resist bias and propaganda.

Support to journalists' professional organisations – key actors for the expected positive change in media integrity and conditions for free expression – should become a priority. They are pivotal in defending the value of the profession and high journalistic and ethical standards in media: together with committed civil society organisations, they should form a more solid basis for putting professional self-regulation in place and resisting the tendencies towards tabloidization in media. In this context, decision makers throughout the media

sector – editors, publishers, media owners and media regulators – should be engaged to promote quality journalism in a sustainable manner. The professional organisations are the first ally in support of efforts to establish programmes for media literacy of audience – necessary to retain and foster the critical thinking in the age of social media and "citizens' journalism". Journalist associations and unions should be supported in their aspirations to establish a constructive dialogue with the authorities to discuss all relevant issues of their professional interests.

- There is a strong concern about exposure of partner countries to the pressures of outside propaganda. Its invasion exploits the gaps and weaknesses of the media landscape and the right approach to counter it is to invest in media resilience. However, one way to mitigate these pressures is to offer credible alternative sources of information (the seriousness of quality entertainment should not be underestimated) to the citizens who feel attracted to receiving it in the Russian language. To this end, the feasibility study by the European Endowment for Democracy on strengthening Russian language based media initiatives will form a basis for further goal-oriented discussions, and the EU together with the partners will consider appropriate follow-up to the study.

Civic initiatives active in deconstructing manipulative media content through accurate examination of facts and evidence play an important role in resisting propaganda pressures. Media creating their own quality content and the exchange of this content between like-minded organisations can be an effective and cost efficient way to improve media resilience. This content extends beyond just "hard" news and comprises also documentaries and entertainment.

- Not all topics relevant to media development were covered to the same extent and depth at the conference. But there was a common understanding that the 1st EaP Media conference should be continued, in similar or other formats, to serve as a platform for calibrating political and assistance efforts in the field of media freedom and integrity.