

Statement of the European Journalists Association-The Communication network for the World Press Freedom Day 2012

EU can absorb new countries only if they guarantee press freedom beyond doubt

With great displeasure we must take note that in Europe – the cradle of freedom and democracy - the number of countries which do not adequately meet the requirements of the freedom of the press is growing.

Even in some member States of the European Union the conditions for free media are taking a turn for the worse. Pluralism and diversity of views, opinions and voices is melting or is under open attack by governments and powerful private financial and political institutions. Monopolization of media outlets is turning them into mouthpieces of vested interests and is silencing independent and objective voices. The talents of journalists are being privatized by corporations and political groups under financial and political pressures and the whole profession is gradually degrading.

Such negative tendencies are causing serious concern in countries like Bulgaria, Greece and Hungary. The situation is worsening in Italy (despite Berlusconi's resignation), France, Great Britain, Lithuania and Latvia. With regard to Hungary we are gravely concerned by attempts to introduce licensing by the media regulatory authority which smell of direct state intervention in the media sector.

In most European countries outside the EU we are faced almost every day with blatant violations of civil liberties and human rights. In particular, we critically assess the situation in some Western Balkan countries like Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially with regard to their aspirations to join the EU. EJ shares the opinion that a decision about their membership should be made only when they can offer strict assurances that the standards of press freedom, democracy and human rights are respected beyond doubt in these countries. Brussels must not tolerate any softening of the criteria and draw the right lessons from the hasty admission of Bulgaria and Romania into the EU. This is particularly true for countries like Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, where a free press is still a mirage and where persecution, threats and even physical violence against journalists is common.

In addition to that, we wonder if the closure of strong independent and democratic voices like many foreign language emissions of BBC and Deutsche Welle as a result of funding cuts has had a negative influence on the political and media situation in some European countries.

From the perspective of the EJ the European Union should get more involved in the training of journalists from countries with democratic discrepancies and provide appropriate funding to this purpose. Diplomatic pressure on these countries should be increased and the European Union needs to reemerge as a safe haven for persecuted journalists.

Just 20 years ago we had high hopes that with the collapse of communism and the fall of the Berlin wall a new dawn of peace, solidarity, freedom and respect for human rights is emerging over Europe. But the global economic and financial debacle of the last years exposed the inherent vulnerability and the risks to our democratic systems and

arrangements like never before. It is evident now that these utmost values should not be taken for granted. We must engage in constant battles in order to preserve and uphold them.

Press freedom is a vivid example. The transition from the classic press to new electronic media and the emergence of internet has transformed the whole sphere of mass communications and the profession of journalism. This process has opened new possibilities but has also posed serious challenges to the democratic functioning, the ethical standards and the moral duties of journalism as a public good. Irresponsible and destructive social and economic forces are trying to use those possibilities to their own private ends. 3 May is the day to be alerted those dangers and the EJA is expressing its solidarity with all European colleagues standing up for the defense of their most indispensable right – press freedom.