

Preface – Free European Media

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Free European Media – is a prerequisite for European democracies to redevelop. Increasing of a number of conflicts between media and politics across Europe brought 200 journalists and media stakeholders together at the European Solidarity Center in the City of Gdansk the 15th-16th February 2018 for a conference on this topic underpinned by concrete challenges and conflicts raised.

This book is the second dimension of the project “Free European Media” leading up to and following up the conference as it was not just conference. We will continuously follow-up on all the recommendations, because the conference and this book I not just something between journalists and politicians

During the early 90’s when I was a working journalist on the Danish island Bornholm, I had the pleasure to cooperate with Polish journalists who were proud of how they have created new media to underpin their new democracy in Poland. This cooperation followed by more contacts along the coast of the Baltic Sea was filled with hope for the future.

Decades later, I as president of the European Federation of Journalists returned on missions to Poland first when the public service tv started outsourcing production of their programs – even parts of the news room. Later, two years ago, when the biased policy went worse by a new media legislation giving the government hands on to control the public service media, I paid another visit to Warsaw.

Today the situation in media in Poland is not just a warning of what’s going to happen when populism take over from our democratic values. The day after the new interim media law was signed, the leaders in the public service media were replaced and next day and so were shortly after big number of journalists. Recently the private tv-channel TVN was tried fined 400.000 € because of coverage of a demonstration against the government. These are just two examples and both with a chilling effect as it clearly lines out that it is better not criticizing the government.

Unacceptable and dangerous

Such a politic is totally unacceptable and dangerous for a democratic country and must be brought to an end. This is not only about Poland but is coming to more countries in Europe. Take a view across Europe. Czech Republic has developed another cocktail of a prime minister, owner of one of the big media houses. Even he is being investigated by the police for frauds, he is strongly supported by the reelected president with a reputation of threatening journalists and joking with president Putin that some of the journalists should be liquidated because we are too many. The third part of the dangerous cocktail is the lack of social dialogue which makes it difficult for journalists to make a living out of their work.

A few weeks after the conference in Gdansk we were all shocked, when the Slovakian investigative reporter, 27 year old Jan Kuciak and his girlfriend were murdered. Killings has become an appalling condition for journalists in Europe. It was the third murder of a journalist in the EU within only 7 months following the horrifying killing of Kim Wall and the brutal bomb-attack in Malta killing Dapne Caruana Galizia.

While the murder of Kim Wall is going to be resolved as the court case is ongoing now, the situations for resolving the cases in Malta and Slovakia are much more difficult because the masterminds are hiding and in worst case maybe even protected if such cases would expose the darkest side by being a part of the conflict between media and politics.

Unresolved cases invites for more attacks on Journalists

As long these cases are not resolved and impunity thrives, the risk of more crimes against journalists is high. The UN, UNESCO, Council of Europe, the EU, OSCE together with all media and human rights NGO's urge for fighting impunity, and therefore the states should follow up with clear messages unconditionally defending press freedom. It is a duty for any state to bring the perpetrators to justice not to invite for more attacks on journalists.

Attacks on journalists have many dimensions: Turkey and Azerbaijan are representing two countries, where media freedom de facto is in in prison and more than 150 journalists are behind bars either for fabricated accuses or simply because they as independent investigative journalists have made a very good job.

When we in other countries as in Serbia, that I recently visited on fact-finding mission, see a big number of journalists being harassed and threatened and from time to time in a violating way, we know what next step can be. Therefore, I in Serbia used the opportunity to urge the state president and representatives from the government to turn around and give media and journalism its full support without anything as "but then".

Word matters

Press Freedom is a fundamental pillar of democracy, and we must remind ourselves and our political leaders, what the alternative will bring – we have seen it in its worst case three times during the last century. Remember that it starts each time with the control of words. Therefore, let me use the opportunity here to send a firm message to all European leaders: Stop all sort of attacks on journalists and media and let free, independent and pluralistic media thrive. Therefore, we expect from our political leaders, full support for Press Freedom – full stop.

When states start to interfere in media it can easily get worse:

- When it leads to harassments,
- journalists being beaten up and threatened,
- governments close media and jail journalists
- when journalists are killed and we cannot bring the masterminds to justice.

Therefore, we are all obliged to raise awareness at a very early stage and follow it up continuously as regarding the situation in Hungary where the media legislation has led to more state control and state regulation in the total opposite direction of what we stand on – self regulation.

In my own country that for some while has been known for having the happiest citizens in the world. However, in the state of Denmark we are facing dramatic cuts in public service media with proposals on 20 per cent. Across Europe public service media face cuts and dismissals tearing away one of the fundamentals for citizens to take part in their democracies. Therefore, it was encouraging

to learn about the referendum in Switzerland with a clear majority acknowledging the impact of independent public radio and tv by paying license fee for it.

We see a trend that public service media is under heavy attack without significant positive impact on private media as the total media budget is not a zero-sum game. We must ensure financing models having both strong public service media and private media without state interference. At the same time we should ensure room for new business models. We should stay strong together and urging firmly for what we believe in:

Free European Media!