

Address of Tom van Oorschot, Ambassador of the Netherlands

- Dear Mr. Shentov, Mr. Alexandrov, dear participants at today's conference;

Thank you for the invitation for this conference Media and political influences. Timely just days after the World Press Freedom Day [May 3]; extremely important topic.

- The freedom of the press is **essential for every modern** democracy, and for any society based on the rule of law. Without it there can be no democracy, no rule of law, no accountability;

- we all know the expression **no news is good news**. But in this context we can really wonder whether this expression applies to the press.

Hardly need to explain that **no news** out of conflict zones (like Syria), **is bad news**. It means that journalists are not able to inform us about the atrocities that take place.

- Paradoxically in a time of seemingly unlimited access to information and new channels of content, the most recent Freedom House report states that the access to information and the Global press freedom have declined to their lowest point in 10 years. In 2015 the share of the world's population that enjoyed a free press stood at only 14% (1 out of 7 people!)

- **Two factors** are at play. First: harsh laws – an increase in the use of restrictive legislation against the press. And second: chaotic violence – more and more areas of the world are becoming physically inaccessible to journalists.

There can be no doubt that journalism is becoming more dangerous;

- **Press freedom is under threat** not only in crisis zones but also in more stable countries, as the report by Freedom House shows;
- You've all heard about the recent arrest of Dutch journalist **Ebru Umar**, in Turkey. Although she was released last Thursday and could return to the Netherlands, she is still being prosecuted in Turkey because of criticism against Erdogan.
- But it should be clear that the fundamental principles of press freedom and freedom of speech are **not negotiable**. The behaviour of the Turkish authorities is unfitting for a country that wishes to be part of the European Union.
- Problems are seen in many countries and in different scale;
- Bulgaria, for example, is considered by the Freedom House as "Partly free", receiving index of 40, scale 0-best, 100-worst];
- According to the Reporters Without Borders, Bulgaria keeps dropping down, reaching position 113 (out of 180 countries) in the 2016 World Press Freedom Index, which is 7 places lower than in 2015;
- This is the lowest position in the European Union and indicates issues, which should be put on the table and discussed openly;
- In a healthy democracy political journalism is essential. It helps **prevent abuse of power** and exposes failures in the system; In the Netherlands parliamentary inquiries have been triggered by the findings of investigative journalists.
- **Critical journalism** might not always be easy for government or politicians. But we can't do without it. Debate is the lifeblood of democracy. Is it always easy? No. Nor should it be. Asking questions is part of our system of checks and balances;
- Asking tough questions keeps politicians sharp. If they can't explain it, there's probably something wrong – with the decision, with the narrative, or both.

- At the same time critical journalism also should meet certain requirements. The public needs information it can trust. For this trust to exist, reporters must abide by the basic principles of quality journalism and adhere to the highest standards; Good reporting is not an easy trade. A journalist needs to be rigorous, always keep checking the facts. Specially with the social media this becomes a challenge since the news spreads faster and the time for checking is almost reduced to seconds. But the need stays to check and double check and not assume.

And most important we need **independent news**. At the heart of any trusted media source we need to have editorial and financial independence.

Only then can the free press empower people with different points of view and play its vital democratic role.

[And let us realize the danger of propaganda. I am not talking about propaganda in the communist time. But even nowadays in Europe propaganda is used to undermine the achievements of the EU. Dangerous development]

In conclusion let me remind you that freedom of expression and the freedom of the press is one of our core values:

article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
states:

'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression. This right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.'

Thank you!