



Message of Greeting of Austrian Minister for European and International Affairs Ursula Plassnik to the Congress of the European Association of Journalists

Freedom of thought and freedom of expression have been and continue to be building blocks of our new Europe in the 21st century.

The idea of a continent united in freedom and democracy stood at the very beginning of the European unification process. It took courageous men and women to give expression to the idea, and to persist until not only laws and regulations were put in place but also continue to fully translate them into reality.

Although we have come a long way in the last decades, there is no reason for self-gratification or complacency. Hrant Dink, Anna Politkovskaya or Ivo Pukanic constitute a vivid, haunting reminder for all of us that in Europe and beyond, journalists, media workers, editors and writers continue to be threatened or even murdered for the “crime” of speaking out freely.

Austria and the European Union have not kept silent about such cases but have vigorously called for their full investigation and the prevention of further attacks on media representatives. Freedom of expression must not be stifled by fear.

No open and democratic society can exist without free and critical reporting by the media. It is for this reason that Austria has put media and their work at the centre of its efforts for dialogue – be it the dialogue of cultures and religions or the attempt to generate new networks in the Middle East or between Serbia and Kosovo. It is specifically in these areas of tension and conflict that media have a particular role to play – and carry a particular responsibility. They are essential in the attempt to counter stereotypes and prejudices by giving space to voices of “the other side” and by raising awareness of the necessity for dialogue and common understanding.

In all these efforts I put particular emphasis on women. Not only as active journalists but also as a substantive issue of media attention and reporting. In all too many regions of the world the voices of women are not heard, their aspirations, experiences and views not sufficiently reflected in public. Yet women represent 50 percent of the potential and creativity of any given society. No one can afford to ignore them or have their requests and inputs unheard.

In our societies the protection of the freedom of expression and of the media raises also new issues. The sometimes close political and - in some cases - even economic interrelation between individual political representatives and media may have direct

implications not only on the independence of media but also on the exercise of power in a democracy.

The freedom of opinion is never acquired once and for all. It has to be earned, developed and safeguarded anew every day. The Member States of the European Union, including Austria, are well aware that they, too, must work on their own track record as regards freedom of expression, placing themselves under constant scrutiny by others, notably independent institutions, including the newly established EU Fundamental Rights Agency and the European Court of Human Rights. In addition there is ample space for self monitoring by media committed to quality standards set and supervised by themselves.

With this in mind I am glad to welcome you in Austria and I wish you every success for your conference.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Ursula Plassnik".

Dr. Ursula Plassnik
Austrian Minister for European and International Affairs