



Permanent Mission of Latvia
to the UN



Permanent Mission of Lithuania
to the UN

**The Permanent Mission of the Republic of Latvia to the United Nations
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cordially invite you to

Panel discussion: Protection of journalists and media freedom – key to sustainable future

DATE: 27 May 2015, 1:00 – 2:30 pm

VENUE: Conference Room 8, United Nations Headquarters, New York

Freedom of expression and an independent media are multifaceted issues requiring complex approaches. They are essential elements of a sustainable future and it is a given fact that without free media and safe environment for journalists it is impossible to ensure good governance, transparency, and accountability. Also, self-censorship arising from personal safety concerns, harassment and threats in digital environment, government falsification of “news” and imposed censorship, impunity for crimes against journalists must be addressed so that freedom of expression would be a reality. These and other issues will be on the agenda of the panel discussion. The objective of the panel discussion is to address the critical topics of protection of journalists and media freedom at the multi-actor discussion and to give impetus for a timely and appropriate international response.

Program

1:15 pm Opening remarks:

- H.E. Mr. Edgars Rinkēvičs, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia
- H.E. Mr. Linas Linkevičius, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania

1:30 pm Panel Discussion, moderated by James Bays, Diplomatic Editor, Al Jazeera

- Ms. Dunja Mijatović, Representative on Freedom of the Media, OSCE
- Mr. Guy Berger, Director, Division of Freedom of Expression and Media Development, UNESCO
- Ms. Quinn McKew, Deputy Executive Director, Article 19
- Ms. Milka Tadić Mijović, Journalist, <http://heroes.rsf.org/>

Questions & answers

Live broadcast: <http://webtv.un.org>

Light sandwich lunch will be served starting from 12:30

RSVP: misija.jt@urm.lt

Note: Non-UN badge holders should register till May 25, 2015

Concept paper

Panel discussion: Protection of journalists and media freedom – key to sustainable future

27 May, 2015

CR8, UN HQ, New York

Background

Access to information, freedom of expression and an independent media are essential elements of a sustainable future. Without free media and safe environment for journalists, good governance, transparency, and accountability cannot be ensured. Journalists and other media actors provide a platform for informed discussion across a wide range of development issues – from environmental challenges and scientific progress to gender equality, youth engagement and peace-building. Only when journalists are free to monitor, investigate and report, as well as to criticize policies and actions can good governance exist.

The recent World Press Freedom Day 2015 conference which took place in Riga on 2-4 May highlighted the importance of an independent, free and pluralistic media and called on all relevant actors to improve the quality of journalism, enhance gender equality in the newsroom and promote the safety of journalists. It recognized that freedom of expression across all media platforms is an enabler of sustainable human development, including a culture of peace. Therefore a particular reference was made to the United Nations negotiations for a new package of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and especially Goal 16 on the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies with access to justice for all.

It is observed¹ that freedom of the press has descended to its lowest level in a decade. Beheadings of journalists by ISIS and journalists who are killed while trying to cover a story in an area of conflict highlight the dangers. Yet in accordance to data gathered by non-governmental organisations, vast majority of journalists are killed not because they entered a dangerous environment like a war zone, but because of being directly and individually targeted for the content of their reports or other reasons linked to their professional activities.

Nearly 700 journalists have been murdered since 1992, and 90 percent of their killers have not been brought to justice. In 2014 alone, at least 61 journalists were killed, and more than 200 journalists were imprisoned, but there is no way to calculate the number of journalists whose professional activities were affected and influenced by threats, intimidation, harassment, censorship, spread of disinformation, or the sense of insecurity brought about by impunity for the crimes against journalists. The fear of persecution as well as the fear of prosecution forces media to operate under a range of constraints. Not just journalists are threatened by these realities - the development of democratic and sustainable societies are also under threat.

Challenges for journalists and free media

Every journalist has to employ self-regulation in order to adhere to certain ethical standards, to respect human dignity and not to incite hatred. Yet if journalists start to screen the content of media reporting in order to avoid possible implications for their personal safety (because of intimidation, harassment and threats), self-censorship can be the result. A level of fear that results in self-censorship keeps journalists from maintaining a critical stance and radically diminishes number of independent voices in a society while at the same time hindering its growth.

¹ https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FreedomofthePress_2015_FINAL.pdf

Implications of harassment and threats are nowhere as evident as in digital environment where journalists are exposed the most. Online attacks, particularly against female journalists, tend not only to target the content of the reported information, but also to degrade them as persons through abusive comments, sexual threats and sexual harassment.

Another challenge free media faces is when governments resort to suppression of press through direct censorship and control over the flows of information and manipulation of public opinion. Governments that engage in the dissemination of false news while presenting it as genuine through state-controlled media confuse, obscure, and shift the public perception and journalists who, through their reporting, seek to challenge imposed government narratives, become targets of repression, harassment and even imprisonment on false convictions.

The terrorist attacks on journalists earlier this year in Paris and Copenhagen should have been a wake-up call to give more support and more protection for the work of journalists. But instead of taking more responsibility, some government authorities have sought to address the problem by restricting content of information that journalists may publish.

Impunity for crimes against journalists causes self-censorship, thus curtailing free expression and depriving society as a whole of information. Failure to respond adequately to crimes against journalists and other media actors, including killings, physical attacks and threats, creates a climate of impunity that only encourages more severe violations of freedom of expression.

Self-imposed restrictions on professional activities of journalists have direct implications on the right of all people to seek, receive and impart information.

Free media and sustainable future

Free, independent and pluralistic media environment for journalists is a cornerstone of democracy, and it should be defined as a main goal for sustainable development that guaranties freedom of expression and democracy itself, as it was clearly stated in the Synthesis Report of the Secretary-General on the Post-2015 Agenda² *‘press freedom and access to information, freedom of expression, assembly and association are enablers of sustainable development’*.

As the international community prepares for the adoption of a long-term agenda for sustainable development we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to expressly state that the free media and the right to information are an essential part of the process for strengthening civil society. Explicit mentioning of these issues in the SDGs would also stress that freedom of the media and information is not just useful for development, but is a necessary for the existence of true democracy as well. The right to know about the life of the society and to voice one’s thoughts is a benefit in itself.

The issues related to the media freedom are and will remain relevant to sustainable development in the future - both as an end, and as means towards all the other goals of sustainable development. Implementation of other goals requires the presence of a free, independent media and enhanced safety of journalists, and to have access to pertinent information on various issues.

Sustainable Development Goal 16.10 refers to all countries working to “ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.” While different actions relevant in this regard are being undertaken, and one of them is the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity is being implemented, and this represents a significant contribution to SDG 16.10, both in conflict and non-conflict situations, however there is a need to agree on indicators for Goal 16.10 in order to ensure a

² Synthesis Report of the Secretary-General On the Post-2015 Agenda “The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming All Lives and Protecting the Planet”, 4 December, 2014

firm underpinning for the target. This is vital if there is to be a role for independent media or press freedom or safety of journalists in the SDGs.

Possible questions to consider

Discussions could contribute to a broader debate on how to tackle the challenges of protecting journalists and the challenges to media freedom today with a focus on the global development agenda.

- How to develop public awareness about importance of press freedom and how to counter-act restrictions or harassment against journalists?
- How to devise better ways of interaction between different stakeholders in protecting and promoting freedom of the media?
- How important is the clear mentioning of the independent media and freedom of expression in the SDGs?
- What might be those feasible, suitable and relevant indicators of media freedom for all countries? Should such indicators be based on existing mandates in the UN system or existing data collection or human rights statistics?
- How can safety of journalists and free media be shown to create the conditions conducive to implementation of other SDGs? How does reporting and access to information helped mitigate health crises or disease outbreaks? How do a free and unbiased media contribute to better education or economic development?