

KEYNOTE SPEECH
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Project: *Strengthening the Media's Role as a Watchdog Institution in Georgia*
Round Table – Association Building in the Georgian Media
September 2, 2010
Tbilisi Marriott Hotel, King George Hall

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, members of the media and civil society, it is the second round-table that I have the honor to take part in under the project *Media's Role as a Watchdog Institution in Georgia*.

As all of you know, the issue of *media freedom is very high on the EU-Georgia agenda*. Many of you attended the 'Civil Society Human Rights Seminar on Media Freedom' back in November 2009 aimed at identifying problems and finding solutions. It also assisted in the preparation of the first human rights' dialogue with Georgia. This is a platform for the exchange of views between the government and the EU on human rights issues, including the media. The views expressed in round-tables and meetings like the one today, are generally reflected in the documents presented to the government at Human Rights' dialogues which have become regular – twice a year – since last November. This, I hope is an incentive for media professionals to have constructive discussion and come up with viable solutions.

The EU closely follows the implementation of the ENP Action Plan between EU and Georgia and publishes its observation in its Progress Reports. Progress report for 2009 says 'the broadcast media remain an issue of major concern in Georgia, where the television environment is reported to be highly polarized and biased.'

In this environment it was critical to continue assisting the Georgian Public Broadcaster which, by definition is there to serve public interest. During our last meeting in February, I mentioned what BBC consultants working with the GPB told me. The "**Moambe**"'s **editorial line started to change** for the better, they said in February 2010. I was extremely pleased to learn that during the monitoring undertaken in May-June 2010 in the framework of another EU funded project implemented by UNDP, a group of 10 Georgian experts observing prime time news and political talk-shows on 6 TV channels unanimously identified the GPB as the most balanced and neutral. I am not saying that this is enough, but this is certainly a positive step forward and we will need to build on this.

You may recall that the EU-commissioned survey of public perceptions of the media undertaken by CRRC in November 2009, said: **there is high public interest in information provided by the media** and this is a very important premise. To satisfy that

high public interest in information there are fundamental issues to be addressed. One of them is easier access to public information by journalists and I have noticed that journalists, specifically the Association for regional journalists, have alerted the authorities of this. At the same time this puts an additional responsibility on journalists and media outlets that should ensure that the information is verified and factual. There were cases when some media outlets would spread information about the EU activities in Georgia based on rumour and speculation, sometimes so incredible that we did not even try to request rebuttal. You would ask - why? Often because the standard of journalism are so unethical that you don't know where to start from and just give up. And you would not get the last word in any case...

In these circumstances it is understandable that the EU and the Council of Europe supported the elaboration of a **Code of Ethics for journalists**. Last December more than 120 journalists, mainly from the regions, subscribed to the Code. We have Civil Development Institute present here who was instrumental in making this happen, so I extend my gratitude to them and to **Ia Antadze** in particular. A Board of Ethics has been established to supervise the journalists' adherence to the principles of the Code. The Board has done a very valuable and meticulous job while pursuing few, but very important cases. We have observed that although not all the Charter signatories may agree with the decisions, but the Board's judgements have been well grounded.

It is clear that ethics alone cannot be a solution for developing a professional media. To function properly the media, as any business requires **enabling and supportive environment**. And this is what the EU intends to strengthen through projects that were launched last year. The guiding principle is to help the media to develop and journalists to become more professional. But for this, journalists need incentives and one incentive could be better conditions and employment. We are aware of significant shortcoming with regard to labour conditions and generally, labour contracts with journalists. On a wider scale the European Union is closely watching the process of Georgia's alignment with the International Labor Organization's Conventions on core labour standards, especially concerning the right to organise and to collective bargaining. There are consultations between the Government, the Association of Employers to review the provisions of the Labour Code. This certainly may have implications for those employed in the media. However, to quote the prominent Russian humorists of the Soviet times Ilf and Petrov which you may all know: *"The task of aiding the drowning is the responsibility of the drowning themselves."*

There have been several failed attempts in Georgia to establish Trade Unions. But I believe that the last one - **establishment of the first Trade Union of Mass Media Employees** this summer will prove to be a success.

The Trade Union were established with a view to defending common interests and voice them with the employers. Ideally, this should contribute to an improved labour security. As the Trade Unions are taking their first steps, we expect that they will collaborate with

the Georgian Association of Regional Broadcasters and Georgian Regional Media Associations, as well as all other associations which represent the interests of media professionals. Here dialogue and association building seems essential.

Earlier failures are largely explained by the different conditions in which the electronic and print media operated. Another reason was the difference between the conditions in the Tbilisi-based and regional media outlets. The challenge lies in balancing all these diverging interests of media professionals.

Georgia knows successful media associations and at least two of them are present here today. However, to echo the title of today's roundtable - association building is a never ending process. Once associations are built, they need to develop their capacities.

From today's meeting I expect a discussion on the sustainability and organisational capacities of those associations representing you as media professionals. You may identify the most urgent problems that need to be addressed and, for example, prepare a proposal to apply for the upcoming national call of our Non-State Actors programme.

I will tirelessly repeat that changes within the media and the media environment will not happen overnight; it has, to a large part, to come from within, from the sector itself and the people engaged there, as journalists and owners.

Hence you, the Georgian media professionals will need to work continuously and relentlessly. We will be by your side to help, as always.

Thank you.