

## **Opening speech by Commissioner Johannes Hahn at the EU - Western Balkans Media Days 2018**

*Check against delivery!*

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to open this two-days' conference dedicated to the media in the Western Balkans. I would like to thank you Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and your government, for hosting this conference, despite challenging political circumstances. I also warmly welcome and thank all our speakers and workshop chairs. Special thanks to Tim Judah who will take us through these two days of discussions. I am particularly grateful to Harlem Desir for being available for the keynote address and joining our panel discussion right after.

I am very pleased to see such a high level of interest in the conference (we have more than 300 registered participants) and that the discussion takes place again here in the Western Balkans region as it is vital that you take full ownership of this debate, which is fundamental for democracies.

Important decisions have been taken about the future of your region since we last met in this format in Tirana.

Our Western Balkans Strategy has created a new dynamic in the European perspective for the Western Balkans. For the first time since 15 years, Heads and States of EU Member States met their counterparts from the Western Balkans at the Sofia summit.

In June, we witnessed the historic agreement on the name issue in Prespa. I would like to congratulate, again, Prime Minister Zaev and his team as well as their Greek counterparts to this great achievement. Two weeks later, the European Council set out the path to opening accession negotiations with Skopje and Tirana.

There have been important developments on the economic front as well, with the Regional Economic Area delivering dividends through increased job creation and better trade figures within the region and between the region and the EU.

So the overall picture is one of new and positive momentum in the enlargement process.

But unfortunately this is not the case in the area of media freedom.

Most disturbing of all is that violence against journalists has not been eradicated, and is even on the increase. According to data from the Regional Platform for advocating media freedom and safety of journalists, there were 11 cases of physical attacks on journalists in the Western Balkan countries this year alone. The irresolute attitude of those in charge of finding and convicting perpetrators creates a terrifying atmosphere of impunity impacting heavily on free and independent reporting. Media freedom cannot exist without an independent and functioning judiciary.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In our Western Balkans Strategy, we stressed the importance of safeguarding fundamental rights, which need not only be respected, but LIVED, with media freedom and freedom of expression as one of the main pillars.

In all the country reports, we clearly state that there will be no accession without safeguarding media freedom and granting journalists working environments free from intimidation and pressure.

That is why we continue addressing authorities on these important issues, be it publicly, as just at this conference, be it in bilateral meetings and, of course, in our reports. But this is not paperwork only: my services are actively working with the governments and authorities to support reforms and concrete improvements. Also in this respect, I commend our hosts, who have started comprehensive reforms, and I can hear from journalists that there is less pressure and more space for independent reporting.

With that in mind, I welcome, that the new, format of Media Days tackles the issue of media freedom from a **BROADER, MORE PRACTICLE and INCLUSIVE** angle. I welcome explicitly the participation of political actors in this exchange. Our meeting presents an opportunity to pass the message to governments about their due commitments and responsibility regarding freedom of expression.

But equally important is the fact that the Media Days serve as a professional forum for identifying challenges and discussing ways of adapting to the radical changes we are witnessing in the media landscape. Standards of professional journalism need to be maintained in all forms of press publications, no matter if printed or online.

That is why this year's Media Days will deal with education/training – a traditional priority area for international and bilateral donors' media support. Our task is that the EU helps developping the skills needed to work effectively in the new media environment. I expect our new regional journalist training programme which will be in place by the end of the year, to meet these requirements.

Quality media also need educated consumers. Therefore training and education must include media literacy, which helps citizens to differentiate between quality content and the spreading fake news. In fact, this should be part of general education. To this end, we will expand our cooperation programme with UNESCO in the Western Balkan region.

We are in Skopje today, only two weeks ahead of a crucial referendum. The Media Days were scheduled long before the date for the referendum was set. However, this specific political context can serve as an example why Quality Reporting is so important! Quality reporting helps citizens to make an **INFORMED** decision! I thank all media who reinforce the common efforts to inform in a factual way about the contents of the name agreement and the consequences of citizens' votes. And for raising awareness among their readers/audience of the importance to use their democratic right to vote. This is one of the most convincing examples of the crucial role media are playing in the democratic process.

I would like to touch upon another issue, which is of special importance for this region: Our Western Balkans Strategy stresses the need for reconciliation and media can contribute a lot, by resisting simplistic stereotypes and polarisation.

Quality reporting will always pay due attention to the complexity of situations, showing options for solutions and compromise, instead of agitation.

In this context, I would like to highlight the importance we attach to our cooperation with Civil Society organisations dedicated to media freedom. And I welcome the increasing exchange between media, political actors and civil society representatives. Change can only happen in an inclusive manner! And though the responsibility to grant the appropriate

conditions for media freedom lies clearly with governments, there is also – as mentioned in last year's conference by journalists themselves – the responsibility to keep quality standards high as a true firewall against political polarisation.

This leads me, finally, to a further topic the conference will deal with: the economic conditions for media. It is clear that we have to invest more work, thoughts and concrete financial support into creating new and sustainable business models and encouraging innovative media-start-ups.

I thank all representatives engaging actively in the workshops and we are all looking forward to the presentation of the conclusions tomorrow.

Thank you and wishing all of you a constructive and productive exchange.