

**OPEN LECTURE OF THE HEAD OF OSCE PRESENCE, AMBASSADOR EUGEN  
WOLLFARTH, AT THE BEDËR UNIVERSITY, TIRANA**

*13 March 2012*

Dear Dr. Gjana,  
Dear students,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Good afternoon

First of all, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak in the first academic year at this recently founded University.

I am very pleased to be here today to discuss an important subject, the link between politics and the media.

This happens at a time when freedom of expression is coming under ever increasing focus throughout the world – and is as important as ever.

Indeed, Mr. Eamon Gilmore, the OSCE's Chairperson in Office, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign and Trade Minister of Ireland, has stated that the OSCE considered as a priority "to ensure that existing OSCE commitments in relation to freedom of expression and freedom of the media apply to all forms and means through which these freedoms are exercised."

Such a declaration, some two decades after the collapse of Communism in Europe, is a clear indication that the political freedoms that were ushered in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe were not always fully reflected within the media.

Today, I would like to dwell on several aspects of this dichotomy between the politics and the media from a viewpoint of freedom of expression.

To begin with, let us remember that in modern democracies, without any formal mention of their role in law, the media is often regarded as the 'Fourth Estate' or 'Fourth Power'.

In the eyes of ordinary citizens, the media is as important as government, parliament and judiciary because they work at an equally important level acting as 'watchdogs' for the public good.

The fast and increasingly accelerating pace of political, economic and social development in the last two centuries, especially towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has not only entitled, but also made it a large responsibility for the media to hold political leaders and parliaments to account.

As a result of this obligation, the media have come to possess the power of generating open discussions and in helping to create public opinion on political processes.

In fact, public opinion can be and very often is influenced by the power of the media.

It is obvious that this 'dual power' represents both opportunities and risks for political leaders.

Riding on a 'crest of a wave' of support generated by the media, some politicians will score election victories while others may lose support when coming under the same media scrutiny. Among the most spectacular examples is maybe that of Richard Nixon, who became the first and only US President forced to resign from office as a result of investigative journalism journalism.

Yet, as modern technology has improved, the media have become ever more dependent on the availability of financial resources to maintain their level of operations.

With the introduction of satellite communications and cable broadcasting over the last two decades, the media have undergone a fundamental transformation in the way they work.

Perhaps it is even better to call it a 'revolution' given the immense changes.

While the media previously represented the public's voice as the ultimate source of political power, with the requirement of more money to sustain and also develop their operations, the media have increasingly become involved with the world of business and finance.

They themselves have often turned into big businesses with their economic interests at stake in the political processes.

This is clearly setting limits to their political freedom, while also helping them to survive economically.

Although Albania embraced political freedoms at the start of the 1990s, the advancement of technology, particularly the broadcast media technology, has forced the same financial requirements on to the Albanian media scene.

As a result, in Albania today we see many media outlets being partly or wholly owned by businesspeople that in parallel have interests in other sectors.

However, when business people, who own or manage media outlets, enjoy good relations with politicians, those relations can inevitably bring about restrictions in editorial freedom.

At the same time, one needs to be mindful that media outlets should never be owned, operated or managed by the state or government organs either directly or indirectly.

If this is or would be the case, then it is fair to ask the question "Who is to control the media?"

Before answering this, we need to note that, either through ownership or by the power of advertising money, the media can be 'controlled' by two further 'powers'.

First, there is the power of the consumer, who, as the recipient of the service, is able to control the media by refusing to buy a newspaper or by not watching a TV programme.

This kind of ‘control’, of course, takes a long time to have any real impact.

Second, is the power of the media.

And this, I would contend, is the most appropriate solution of all.

This is why, in most Western countries governed by multi-party systems, media self-regulation was established by the media themselves.

And I would like to see similar structures function more effectively and efficiently in Albania.

Returning, if I may, to the important task that media perform in modern societies, I would like to make a reference to the concept of democracy.

Although a complex notion in itself, democracy is a system of governance based on discussion of freely formed opinion.

It is a system in which civil society operates as a major element of the decision making process through active public participation whose welfare are affected by political decisions..

I believe it is at this point that the role of media comes into play.

To be able to form their opinion freely, citizens need to know what the facts are.

Based on the information they receive, they will be able to decide where their best interests lie.

Like-minded people with common goals can then also create interest groups to pursue their objectives and try to influence political decision making.

However, in an environment where the media fail to provide such ‘factual’ information and, instead, revert to feeding opinionated interpretations, a distorted picture of reality will most likely emerge.

It is not only the individual citizen who needs to see what politicians are trying to achieve.

It is also civil society, the organized force representing the voices of various sections of civil society that relies on factual and accurate media reporting.

Civil society is dependent on media in that they (the media) have to disseminate messages to the wider population as to how various actors within civil society pursue their goals, what activities they undertake and how they mobilize stakeholders.

Looking at Albania in this context, there is clearly some considerable way to go.

The 2010 Civil Society Index states that Albania suffers from low levels of active citizenship in that the extent to which citizens engage in policy-related initiatives is the weakest dimension of civil society.

And, most importantly, the media need to provide for a platform for civilized, educated and enlightened political dialogue among the leaders and members of political parties, a platform that should help citizens to identify the policies that they believe they should support.

By keeping the ‘intellectual bar’ high, and by allowing a multitude of views on vital social and economic issues to be expressed in a comprehensible and analytic manner, the media can serve to greatly strengthen democratic practices.

I think we have to admit that there are some serious issues that need to be addressed to ensure the functioning of a responsible, pluralistic, free and independent media in Albania.

First, the current ownership structure in Albanian media constitutes sometimes a barrier against factual, accurate and objective reporting of news in both print and electronic media.

Second, self-regulating mechanisms have failed to assert their authority and to ensure commitment to basic ethical standards of journalism.

The lack of truthful reporting is eroding trust in media on the part of the public.

If this trend were to continue, the media might be transformed to a tool of ‘mass entertainment’ and thus lose their vital role as a help to form public opinion.

Third, there is a legislative vacuum regarding the operations of electronic media.

As both print and electronic media outlets continue to expand their presence on the Internet, there is increased concern regarding intellectual property not only among journalists, but also within the artistic community pertaining to the issue of copyrights.

Clearly a law regulating internet presence of the media needs to be passed as soon as possible.

Fourth, the employment conditions of journalists need far greater attention.

There are increasing reports that journalists, working in the newsrooms of various media outlets, have not received their salaries for months.

This situation serves to erode the ability of media to report in a timely and accurate way.

Therefore, much needs to be done to raise the standards of journalism and media in Albania.

Given its mandate, the OSCE Presence in Albania has been tackling many of these issues.

The Presence, through its contribution to the review of the draft law on broadcast media, has assisted upgrading of the text of the law to European standards.

Efforts to switch Albania's broadcasting technology from analogue to digital have also received substantial assistance.

We funded a study trip for the staff of the technical secretariat to France to help them draw lessons from the process of switchover that was conducted in that country.

Later we also hired an expert to review the Government's digitalization strategy and thanks to these steps, the Government has now finalized its strategy and is ready to start implementation.

To help understand the employment circumstances in the media, the Presence is implementing a project with the Union of Journalists and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

Professor Gjana,  
Students,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Seen from the OSCE Presence in Albania's view, Albania is progressing along the path of European integration.

For this journey to end with a satisfactory outcome, all institutions in the society, government ministries, agencies, civic movements and the media will have to play their parts to the full.

As I have tried to suggest today, the media have an important role to play and the Presence is determined to assist to help media play that role.

Before I close, I would like to touch briefly on the role that politics plays in the process.

After all, the media, as we have seen does not work in isolation.

For the media to be able to do their job in an impartial and objective way, it will require the political class to respect and accept that differing political views will prevail.

However, it is on those occasions when political parties find themselves incapable of showing this approach that we see the media world infected by political bias and partial reporting.

And the loser in this story is the consumer, especially when such a disease affects large sections of the media.

That is why it is important for effective legislation to be in place that allows journalists the freedom of expression - free from the fear of political and / or economic penalty - to report on the news outside of any political interference.

But as I said at the start, this issue can be lost just as easily as it can be won so we must all be vigilant.

Let me quote Thomas Jefferson:

“The Price of Freedom is Eternal Vigilance”

I invite you all, I invite you as free citizens to join those who remain vigilant.

Now, in closing, I will be looking forward to being part of similar discussions focusing on the importance of the media in the future.

Thank you very much and I am prepared to take and answer some of your questions.

**E.o.T.**