



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
Freimut Duve**

Speech of Mr. Freimut Duve at the Third Central Asian Conference in Almaty

10 December 2001

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends, Dear Journalists,

I would like to welcome all of you to the Third Central Asian Media Conference in Almaty, organised by my Office in conjunction with the OSCE Centre in Almaty. Two previous conferences, held in 1999 in Bishkek, and in 2000 in Dushanbe, showed the need for this regional dialogue, the need to discuss the numerous challenges to media freedom in Central Asia. When we met in Bishkek, we were in a much more optimistic mood regarding the future of media in the area. Our optimism slightly decreased in Dushanbe.

This conference is held at a time when there is a completely different situation in the world, when an anti-terror coalition is waging a military campaign to the south which will affect the countries of Central Asia. We are meeting at a time when several governments have stressed the priority of national security matters over human rights, an argument not only legitimately used at a time of war but also misused to stifle dissent and public debate.

Just three weeks ago I met in London with the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression and the OAS Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression. In our Joint Declaration we stressed that “guarantees for freedom of expression have developed over centuries but they can easily be rolled back; we are particularly concerned that recent moves by some governments to introduce legislation limiting freedom of expression set a bad precedent.”

We have monitored cases in Northern America and in Western Europe that, although in the single digits, provide an example that may be interpreted differently in the newly emerging democracies. The firing of an editor or the discontinued publication of a controversial comic strip in the United States, although still regrettable, will not seriously undermine the country’s solid freedom of expression foundation: the First Amendment. The precedent it sets, however, may send chills through this region, where the process of democratisation is fragile to say the least.

When the *National Union of Journalists* in Great Britain warns that at a time of crisis the “BBC goes straight into “Ministry of Information” mode,” this concerns all of us. However, the average British citizen will still have numerous sources to choose from for news. This is not the case in countries where the state broadcaster is the predominant one, as it is in the Central Asia.

Even more worrying are the results of some public opinion polls. According to *Gallup*, for example, four out of five Americans are willing to sacrifice some freedoms for the sake of greater security.

Here I would like to stress that these issues were raised in the Bucharest Ministerial Declaration, adopted on 4 December, which underlined that the OSCE participating States were “determined to protect our citizens from new challenges to their security while safeguarding the rule of law, individual liberties, and the right to equal justice under law.”

Another quote: “defence of national security is one of the more significant and often used reasons by governments to justify their interference into the work of the media.” These words were said by one of the participants at the Second Media Conference in Dushanbe that took place more than a year ago. How true they sound today.

One of the issues we should discuss here deals with stability versus human rights. Can peace and prosperity be ensured when human rights, and especially freedom of expression, are violated on a regular basis? Some of your leaders may say “yes.” How does the government and the civil journalistic community react to the establishment, for example, of a radical Islamic newspaper or magazine, that shies away from “hate speech” but promotes ideas that, if implemented, would mean the end of any form of democracy? Does one allow such a media outlet to exist for the sake of the principle of freedom of expression, or does one support the government in closing it down? Can stability and human rights co-exist peacefully in all countries, or this rule applies only to certain states and excludes others? Isn’t “national security” often a code-word for attacks on any form of opposition media, especially those that try to investigate corruption? I hope we will be able to debate possible answers to these challenges.

My Office has taken an active interest in the work of the media in Central Asia. We have defended those who had been persecuted for their ideas and writings. We have even helped some writers move to Western European countries where there is a growing intellectual community from this region.

When the Editor of a Tajik opposition newspaper *Charogi Ruz* Dodojohn Atovulloev was detained at a Moscow airport in July at the request of the Tajik authorities, my Office was immediately involved in securing his release. Another case I am dealing with right now: the detention of Uzbek political leader, writer and editor Mohammed Solih in Prague at the request of the Uzbek authorities. In July, the Russian government helped Atovulloev safely leave the country. I expect no less from the Czech government.

On many occasions I have written to the authorities in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, demanding that they stop the harassment of independent media. Sometimes I was able to defend a newspaper, a journalist, more often: not. I looked into the structural issues of media freedom, or, more precisely, into “structural censorship” that often is as lethal as open censorship. Sending the tax collector to an independent newspaper twenty times a year can destroy a free voice. I am also concerned with the ownership question and how some of the new media owners, claiming to be independent, are closely connected to the power structures. One of the issues mentioned at the Bucharest Ministerial Council, specifically, by US Secretary of State Colin Powell, was the connection between corruption and terrorism. Here, again, the media, have a fundamental role to play as society’s watchdog. These are difficult problems, they will not be solved quickly. Nevertheless, I will continue fighting for press freedom in Central Asia, but we can only be successful if we work closely together.

You may have noticed that I do not mention Turkmenistan. There is a reason for that: it is the only country in the OSCE region where at present press freedom does not exist in any shape or form. It is a country more reminiscent of the former cold war times than of an emerging

democracy that is a member of a family of declared democracies, the OSCE. Next year my Office plans to look more closely at Turkmenistan and I do not exclude that we will issue a special report on the media situation in this OSCE participating State.

I am also looking at publishing a book in the series *Defence of the Future*, a project of my Office for the past two years. Two books have already been printed: bringing together authors from south-east Europe and the Caucasus to discuss what can be done for the future generations in these regions. I now plan to publish a similar book on Central Asia, inviting writers and journalists to openly discuss issue of concern to your citizens: stability versus human rights, development of civil society, the future of free media, or whatever else they wish to discuss. Their thoughts will be bound in a book and distributed in all your countries and in Europe.

I initiated another project in Central Asia: as you know, in the aftermath of the 11 September attack hundreds of journalists from all over the world arrived in the Central Asian countries. In Tajikistan more than 1400 foreign journalists received accreditation in the first month after the attacks. To provide assistance to these journalists, my Office, together with the OSCE Mission in Tajikistan, decided to start an OSCE Information Hotline in Dushanbe, that is run by the OSCE Mission. It has been a major success story. I am looking at ways how international organisations can help train journalists in a more expeditious and professional manner. In this area a lot has been accomplished in Bosnia and Herzegovina and some of that experience could be relevant for Central Asia, like, for example, the establishment of a *BBC* training course: a very successful endeavour in Sarajevo that can be repeated.

Here I would like also to mention the broadcasts of different international media into the region: often they are the only free voices heard in Central Asia. They should be supported and I hope that these broadcasts will continue.

There is a lot of work to be done in Central Asia. With the war against terror progressing, more international attention is directed at your region. More journalists visit it, more stories appear in the world press informing the public of the difficult issues you have to tackle in all spheres of life.

I would like to end my remarks with the words of the great Kazakh writer, poet and political leader Mukhtar Shakanov who wrote about the December 1986 student demonstrations in Almaty:

“For those bold youngsters, a lift,
As they went out
On the Square,
In Alam-Ata, in the bare
And frosty
December days there,
With firm demands, you see,
For freedom, democracy...”

The struggle for freedom and democracy in Central Asia is still going on. Many of you sitting here are part of it. You have a tough time ahead. But remember: without free journalists there can be no true democracy.

Thank you.