

**Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting
on Freedom of the Media:
Protection of Journalists and Access to Information
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**FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION CANNOT BE COMPREHENSIVE WITHOUT
DEPOLITICISATION OF THE MEDIA AND TOLERANCE TO PLURALISM**

Some of the fundamental principles of democracy are freedom of opinion and expression. Obviously, these principles should not cause problems in Western democracies, but only improve further.

However, given the current extent of globalisation, development of modern technologies and thereby increased interaction among countries and nations, and active migration processes, something that did not cause censorship yesterday, today may provoke almost an international scandal with unpredictable consequences.

The caricature scandal, which led to large-scale discontent and disturbances in some Muslim countries can be a good example to that. I do not know the reasons and motives that impelled Danish journalists to publish caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad, but some politicians took advantage of this case and almost succeeded in setting two civilizations against each other. Even the Muslims living in countries far away from Denmark, who had not seen those caricatures, have expressed anti-Western and anti-Christian slogans instigated by the interested persons.

I believe that there is no absolute freedom at all as somebody's freedom ends where it encounters another person's freedom. Non-observance of this rule will always lead to a conflict. One cannot expect and demand respect for his/her rights and liberties, unless that person observes rights and freedoms of others. In that regard, mutual respect and understanding is crucial.

And again about the caricatures. On 17 May, the weekly newspaper "Iran" published in the Islamic Republic of Iran carried a caricature where a Persian boy stands next to a cockroach.

There is a dialogue under the caricature, and the boy asks in Persian:

- Why do you live in such horrible conditions?

In reply, the cockroach asks in Azeri:

- What are you talking about?

- You cannot even speak your own language properly, but complain “why we ended up under the influence of other languages? Your life passes in the toilet and you eat sh... anyway. Such is the only fate a cockroach can have”.

Just for your information, according to different estimates, 20 to 35million out of 70 million people residing in Iran, are ethnic Azeris. And they are pictured as cockroaches in the caricature. Certainly our compatriots could not have stood silent to the Persians' approach to Azeri Turks. That is why university students in towns of southern Azerbaijan – Urmiyeh, Tabriz, Ardabil, Khemedan and Zanzan - took to the streets to protest. Note that “Iran” is an official newspaper. Mass protest actions by Iranian Azeris still continue to shake entire Iran. Many of the protesters were killed during demonstrations, part of them cruelly beaten and arrested, and others are suffering different sorts of repressions. Without trying to reveal the real reasons for this publication, I want to note that the Iranian authorities had to officially apologize to their Azeri citizens and even temporarily suspended the publication of the newspaper.

As we can see, freedom of speech and expression on the one hand and tolerance and responsibility on the other are in direct conflict here. Abuse of freedom of speech grew into an insult of ethnic feelings and led to human losses and suffering. And again the totalitarian regime using freedom of expression as a cover, stroke a blow to human rights and freedom in general, and freedom of the press in particular.

An interesting method, isn't it? As a result, there are proposals made even in Western countries – pioneers of democracy and freedom of speech - and, most importantly, almost by journalists themselves, to adopt legislation aimed at regulating “hate language” in the media. The question arises - “who will identify this very hate language and, most importantly, how?” I cannot speak on behalf of entire Europe but I cannot vouch for all of the post-Soviet countries and Azerbaijan in particular.

Here, we are likely to encounter problems which we have been fighting in the last 15 years. I think that in this case the most urgent problem in Azerbaijan is that of depoliticizing the mass media and, correspondingly, improving journalists' professionalism. Even with a huge army of professional journalists but without depoliticizing and eliminating extreme partisan mass media, which is the case in Azerbaijan and actually in all post-Soviet countries, we will not manage to achieve anything substantial, no matter how much we talk about pluralism, freedom of speech and press, and democracy.