**Central regional conference of the SEE Media Observatory:**

**“Media and journalism in South East Europe –**

**Captured by particular interests or turning to serve the public?”**

**Tirana,12-13 June 2014**

(Speech by Clive Rumbold, Acting Head,Delegation of the European Union to Albania)

Dear organizers,

Dear Deputy Minister Elezi,

Dear journalists and media representatives,

Dear academics,

Dear friends,

I am glad to be here, I am glad this conference is taking place.

I am glad because this conference allows us all to keep up the momentum gained in recent years in our joint advocacy for media freedom.

As many of you may know, the EU has enhanced its attention and lent a stronger voice to the protection of freedom of expression in the Western Balkans and Turkey.

Our heightened emphasis on media freedom corresponds with two realities.

First, our emphasis on media freedom is natural, given the importance of an independent and free media for a free society, for democracy.

Second, we have stepped up our efforts in recognition of the concerning situation in this sector in Enlargement countries.

I believe the findings of your report substantiate the concerns that have already put all of us into action.

The 2013 Strategy Paper that accompanies the European Commission progress reports for each country in the Enlargement process, noted the following with respect to freedom of expression:

“The enlargement countries are characterised in most cases by pluralist media landscapes. However…a number of important challenges need to be urgently addressed.

Cases of violence and intimidation against journalists are a continuing problem, leading to self-censorship.

Authorities need to step up their efforts in investigating new and past cases and ensure dissuasive sanctions are applied against perpetrators.

By decriminalising defamation, a major step towards protecting free and critical journalism was taken in southeast Europe.

However, prosecutions of journalists continue.

There is a need to develop and train the judiciary to prevent abuse of state power.

Political interference with media freedom remains a serious concern.

More efforts are needed to ensure the political and financial independence of public service broadcasters.

This is best ensured by having sustainable funding and transparent rules for appointing board members and strong national commitment to the needed reforms.

In most enlargement countries, regulatory agencies are not yet performing satisfactorily.

Moreover, and very importantly, there is no functional media self-regulation in place and media outlets need to make more of an effort to improve their internal governance.

There is also a mjor need to tackle informal economic pressure on the media, including through transparency of media ownership, preventing its excessive concentration and transparent rules on procurement of government advertising.

Labour laws at media outlets also need to be properly implemented”.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The situation is evidently complex, and there are tasks for all.

Of course there are some important variations from one country to the next, but overall the challenges are complex, and shared.

But such is the nature of all challenges that have brought EU Member States together.

In this sense, your efforts to grapple with these issues together reflect the spirit of the Union – cooperation and solidarity.

These problems, and this spirit were the premise for the second ***Speak Up! Conference*** hosted by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Enlargement in June 2013.

You are aware of the emphasis we put on the rule of law, free and fair elections, and the fight against corruption and organised crime as crucial aspects of the Political Criteria for EU membership.

Freedom of expression has always been a fundamental part of the Political Criteria, and we have always paid attention to it.

We have always monitored the state of freedom of expression in all countries, and we have duly reported it in the European Commission’s progress reports.

However, our work over the years, closely following developments in all Enlargement countries, has made clear the need for a ***stronger*** voice and effort in this area.

Media freedom is a pre-requisite for democracy. There is truly no reasonable argument to be had on the absolute importance of a free media for a free society.

That is why we have energetically reacted against the obstacles to media freedom in Albania and the region.

In 2011, the Directorate-General for Enlargement hosted the first ***Speak Up! Conference*** as a response to persistent and rising concerns over:

* economic and political pressures over media owners and journalists,
* the precariousness of the employment status of journalists,
* the debatable independence of public broadcasters,
* as well as legal pressures through defamation laws.

Since then, our dialogue on media freedom has intensified.

Through the European Commission, dialogue among media representatives and journalists across the region has also risen.

A common agenda has developed, as demonstrated by the Conclusions of the second ***Speak Up! Conference*** in June last year.

The Conclusions also best demonstrate the nature of our strengthened commitment to media freedom. Allow me to go over a few of the Conclusions to clarify this point.

First and foremost, the Enlargement process now explicitly requires inclusion of Freedom of Expression issues in the action plans produced under the new approach in accession negotiations.

With the new approach, accession negotiations begin with Chapters 23 on the judiciary and fundamental rights, and Chapter 24 on justice, freedom and security.

Furthermore, issues related to media are also raised during the negotiations on Chapter 10 on Information Society and Media.

In simple words, requiring the planning and implementation of measures to guarantee media freedom ***from the beginning*** of the negotiation process with Chapter 23 means that EU conditionality on freedom of expression and media freedom is even more robust now.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The EU is employing all its policy instruments to exert positive pressure on guarantees of freedom of expression.

In this framework, the Commission requires the investigation of violence and threats against journalists as conditionality in the accession process.

Furthermore, Parliaments are strongly encouraged to follow the example of the European Parliament and take up their unique role in meeting European standards in media legislation.

As the 2013 Progress Report noted, the Albanian Parliament passed important legislation in this area, including the amendments to the criminal and civil code on defamation.

However, such reforms must be completed – complete decriminalization of defamation is required to protect journalists from legal-political pressures.

Albania had a moratorium in place for some time. But a moratorium is an expression of good political will, and therefore, by nature unstable and temporary.

One of the most important conclusions of the second Speak Up! Conference is ***the development of the judiciary as a guarantor of the right to free expression***.

Important work is required with the judiciary to ensure that the verdicts on defamation cases keep damages at reasonable levels.

That means working to ensure that judges do not use state power against freedom of expression. Working with the judiciary in this direction is a long-term effort, for which the Commission stands ready to assist.

Our promise is not only political. Further proof of the rising importance of the media for EU integration is also to be found in our financial plans.

In the Conclusions to the second Speak Up! Conference, the Commission has committed itself to developing a long-term policy approach for EU financial assistance on freedom of expression issues in the Enlargement countries.

Financial support will include:

* training of the judiciary on defamation cases, in partnership with the Council of Europe and OSCE and other partners;
* capacity-development for professional organizations of journalists and media;
* promotion of contacts between journalistic communities in Enlargement countries;
* and the granting of a European Commission award for excellence in investigative journalism, beginning this year already.

Today’s Conference is indeed supported by the EU. That already shows that we are putting our commitments on paper to practice.

We want to make sure that the voices and pillars of democracy and pluralism are kept strong.

That is precisely your purpose today and tomorrow too – and I wish you fruitful discussions these two days in pursuit of that purpose.

Thank you.