

Uzbekistan: Media Freedom Needs Action As Well As Dialogue

Brussels, 6 October 2008. As the EU prepares to reconsider its sanctions against Uzbekistan, last week's "media freedom" seminar in Tashkent should not be considered as evidence of any improvement in the country's 17-year policy of suppressing freedom of speech.

The event on 2-3 October, entitled "Liberalisation of Mass Media – An Important Component of the Democratisation of the Society", was co-sponsored by the EU and the Uzbek government. This seminar, while welcome, cannot in itself be seen as an indicator of a change of attitude by the Uzbek authorities in advance of the EU Foreign Ministers meeting on 13 October, at which the subject of European sanctions on Uzbekistan will be considered.

The EU must not close its eyes to the harsh realities that journalists face in Uzbekistan. Our organisations, which took part in the seminar, can attest first-hand that nothing new was heard from the representatives of the government and the state-controlled media who were present. There was no hint of acknowledgement from the Uzbek side that the country's media are neither free nor independent, that journalists and others are regularly imprisoned for expressing their opinions, that access to critical external internet sites is blocked, and that foreign journalists are not allowed accreditation to cover the country from within.

Indeed, foreign journalists and independent Uzbek journalists were not allowed to cover last week's seminar, while journalists from the state-controlled electronic and print media were present in the meeting room.

When EU ministers meet next week, they should make it clear that there have been no positive changes in the area of media freedom in Uzbekistan and insist that the authorities demonstrate a real commitment to freedom of expression through concrete actions. Therefore, the EU should call on the Uzbek government to:

- In line with Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Uzbekistan is party, guaranteeing the right to freedom of expression:
 - end state censorship of all forms of protected expression;
 - cease harassment and intimidation of independent journalists working in the country;
 - lift reporting restrictions on all domestic and international media outlets;
 - promptly and unconditionally release journalists wrongfully detained for their professional activities and others detained for exercising their freedom of expression;
 - allow international media outlets, including those that have been forced to stop working in Uzbekistan, to register their bureaus and grant accreditation to international journalists;
- Require public trials in line with Article 11 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, by

allowing Uzbek and foreign journalists and other independent monitors to cover criminal proceedings from inside the courtrooms;

- Issue an invitation to the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, as well as the Special Rapporteur on Torture and the Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders.

Meetings such as last week's seminar, and indeed any form of open discussion and dialogue, are certainly to be welcomed if they lead to genuine change. However, the EU must be absolutely clear that a willingness to talk is not the same thing as a commitment to embark on substantive improvements in policy and practice. The Uzbek government's past record of engagement with the EU and other international institutions clearly demonstrates that discussions of possible reforms have consistently been used as a substitute for real and measurable progress. They may be no more than a decoy designed to extract concessions at no cost to the Uzbek authorities.

Amnesty International EU Office

Article 19

La Fédération Internationale des Droits de l'Homme

Human Rights Watch

Institute for War and Peace Reporting

International Crisis Group

Open Society Institute