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Euromed and the Media

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

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Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,

When I spoke to you 'virtually' at the Dead Sea, I looked forward then to eventually meeting some, many of you even, in Barcelona. I am therefore delighted to be back in this beautiful city and to be able to address you 'live' today. I have followed with great interest the reports of the discussions you have had at the Dead Sea and in Marseilles, and I have been impressed by the candour, clarity and courage of the exchanges and of the constructive manner in which you have embraced this 'Euromed and the Media' initiative.

There is a cliché that says that all conferences are 'timely' but I would go further and say that this series of conferences, or workshops, is well overdue. For too long the media has been on the outside looking in, a witness to the unfolding news and events, and of course a transmitter of that news. However, and I am sure you would agree with me, we need a much more active and involved media. The role and responsibility of the media within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership is a crucial topic for discussion, and one that needs serious and joint investigation in order to work together towards the resolution of problems that impact on the pursuit of your work and impede the proper functioning of your profession.

I am referring to problems such as the safety of journalists, xenophobic and racist media, gender inequality, appropriate training, the vexed question of visibility and freedom of expression.

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through the media and regardless of frontiers". That is the theory of article 19 of the Universal declaration of Human Rights.

- Samir Kassir, Lebanese journalist with An Nahar– killed by a car bomb in June, 2005;
- May Chidiac, Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, seriously injured in a car bomb attack in September, 2005;
- Christophe Botanski Journalist with Liberation attacked by Tunisian security forces, November, 2005;
- Countless other journalists killed, jailed, tortured or kidnapped for just doing their job.

This is the reality of the situation. This is an intolerable situation that highlights the high price that journalists pay for reporting uncomfortable truths.

Ladies and gentlemen, friends, we have returned to the birthplace of the Barcelona declaration for a Summit that will give renewed impetus to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and point the way forward in this crucial relationship. It is important to understand that the Mediterranean represents for Europe, even more today than before, an absolute priority. There we see all the biggest challenges for peace – security and the fight against terrorism above all - for development, for respect of human rights, for the safeguarding of the environment, sustainable growth, education – particularly for women and for positive governance of immigration.

It is also a question of mutual interests. Europe cannot assure its own stability, security and prosperity without helping our neighbours achieve similar and relative levels of security, stability and prosperity.

So, what do we expect from this Summit, what do we want for the immediate future of our relationship with our Mediterranean partners? We need an agenda that involves, engages and listens to the needs of the region's people. If we have learnt one thing in the past ten years it is that it is so important to listen to the people and to heed their concerns. We cannot ignore the needs of the very constituency that makes up our partnership.

For that reason we need you, yes you my friends, to be our ears and our mouths; if you need to be informed by us, we also need to be informed by you – not just on the big political events but also on the smaller, more local news, the development of the lives and livelihoods of the region's peoples.

We are not here in Barcelona just to celebrate 10 years of partnership, although it would be churlish not to at least salute that milestone. We have work to do, important work that will map out our priorities and work programme for the next 5 years.

We have key decisions to make and the work programme I have proposed includes measures that require courage and determination. By agreeing to take up the challenges I have suggested we can give the partnership a real boost, and ensure it brings real value to the lives of people on both sides of the Mediterranean.

Our work programme will focus on a few critical areas: human rights and democracy, sustainable economic growth and reform, and education. Why are we focusing on these areas?

We believe that democracy and good governance are essential for stability and prosperity. This has always been a cornerstone of the Barcelona process and now the Neighbourhood policy gives us the added flexibility to work with each partner. So, I will be proposing a new governance facility from 2007 to support those who want to advance in political reforms.

In our economic relationship we need to create a truly regional market to boost investment and growth, and reduce the wealth gap between Europe and its neighbours. 5 million new jobs a year are required to meet the needs of the Mediterranean region's young population. The creation of a Free Trade area by 2010 is more than a political promise – the associated employment and wealth that this will incur are essential to the prosperity, and arguably, the stability of the region.

Why do I place such great emphasis on education? 1/3 of the population of Mediterranean partners is under the age of 15. This is a powerful resource for the future. But if I also tell you that 8 million children do not attend primary school, we have to work to reverse that situation to ensure that this great human resource and potential force can be utilised to the full. Therefore, I am seeking agreement that we all work towards a goal of 2015 to eradicate illiteracy; to have equal provision of education for boys and girls; and get all primary school age children enrolled.

Make no mistake ladies and gentlemen, Barcelona is here to stay, and now coupled and mutually reinforced by the Neighbourhood policy there is a fresh air of optimism and determination as we move into the next phase of relations with our Southern partners.

If we see the Barcelona process as a bridge over the Mediterranean, then the media is a fundamental support pillar of that bridge. You have a crucial role in promoting understanding and tolerance. You represent the pluralism in our society and the richness of our cultures.

Dear friends, I am delighted and encouraged by your presence here. Today's and tomorrow's discussions are a dialogue between peers, north and south of the Mediterranean, about the challenges and problems we share together and the problems that might disrupt relations among us. This is important because it is only once we understand those challenges that we can be clear about the potential role that the media can have in helping address them. And it is only in the light of that that it will be possible for you, the media, to devise and discuss what steps can best be taken by you, by governments, by the European Commission and by the Partnership.

This has been the core objective of these unique gatherings in the 'Euromed and the Media' initiative, to move from rhetoric to reality, to move from criticism to consensus, to move from exclusion to engagement, to move together towards practical, workable conclusions that foresee a more active and durable role for the media in the Partnership. We, the Commission, will support you in whatever way we can.

The European Commission's relationship with the media has sometimes been described as symbiotic. But we definitely need one another, - you need us to provide you with the information of our initiatives, actions, strategies, etc. and we need you as a channel, a conduit of this information to our constituencies. We don't expect you to act as Public Relations agents, or as spinners of our words, and you would certainly not accept that role. But the challenge of visibility and credibility is one that concerns us, on both sides of the Mediterranean, and one that needs our continued attention. Visibility brings credibility which, in turn, brings viability.

In conclusion let me say that the media, therefore, plays a critical role; you are key players in this dialogue. And we want you to be even more active players. As I just said we need you, and I think you need us as well. In this regard let me finish on a light note. I am reminded of what Maureen Dowd of the New York Times wrote about courtship with the media: "Wooing the press is an exercise roughly akin to picnicking with a tiger. You might enjoy the meal, but the tiger always eats last".