

**Speech by Ambassador Angelina Eichhorst,
Head of the Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon**

Conference "Censorship and the Arab Spring Prospects-Cultural
Freedom in the Levant" in the framework of the project "Freedom of
Expression in the Near East" funded by the EU

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends,

Thank you for inviting me to open this conference on "Censorship and the Arab Spring Prospects-Cultural Freedom in the Levant". I feel pleased and honoured to be among many friends and to-be friends, some of you I only know by name but I will finally meet today in person.

Last Saturday, the World celebrated the International Human Rights Day. Every day is a Human Rights Day. The European Union celebrated by focusing on the work of human rights defenders, and on how social media can be used to promote and underpin change. I tweeted that day that 'Everyone can be a Human Rights Defender!', in particular now that we have so much access to innovative means of connecting with each other. We collectively pay tribute to all human rights defenders who

dedicate their lives to promoting and protecting people's fundamental rights around the world.

And then there was the Arab Spring. The blossoming of protests around the region reminded us vividly that human rights are universal and now, finally, more and more people have the knowledge and courage to ask for the right to live in freedom and dignity. You-tube, tweets, facebook, skype, mobile phones, tv, radio carried their message: no more isolation, no more fear, no more oppression.

I do not need to explain this audience how active, committed and convinced the European Union as a whole is to respecting freedom and pluralism of media within its own borders. If you ever have a moment, please read again the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. I can say without any hesitation that we, collectively as EU do not hesitate to denounce arrests of and restrictions to the work of journalists and bloggers, that we strongly oppose unjustified restrictions of access to Internet and other new media, and that we tackle the issue of freedom of expression and media during our political dialogue with our partner countries and with civil society in the same countries. Only two days ago the Government of Lebanon officially stated that Lebanon would tackle democracy, human rights and social justice through the lense of the European Union and that the EU is Lebanon's prime partner in this regard.

Our support to SKeyes with over one million euros is a proof of our commitment to promote freedom of expression, in Lebanon and in the

region. We see through Skeyes, innovation, courage and the desire to connect.

Skeyes support to journalists, engaged activists through awareness campaigns, monitoring violations of freedom of the press and culture or providing legal support to journalists and intellectuals facing prosecution, is invaluable. We decided to help Skeyes to defend press and cultural freedom in the Middle East but also to contribute to the promotion of an Arab public opinion that is able to enjoy and defend its freedom of expression.

This challenging work is done under the "Eyes of Samir Kassir" whose battle for freedom of expression and freedom of opinion inspires us all and represents a symbol of our shared values across the Mediterranean.

Today Skeyes has brought to Lebanon journalists, writers, artists and even former members of government, from Europe and the Middle East. Your experiences in your countries where people often pay or have paid a high price for their enduring commitment to freedom of expression, will nourish a challenging debate on a very controversial limitation of this freedom: censorship. This urgent debate will focus on the roots of censorship, the legal frameworks restricting free expression, new forms of censorship and on the need to protect cultural freedom in the context of political change. I hope there will be a clear follow up to what you will be discussing, and please do not hesitate to feed back your collective thoughts into policy or to decision makers.

I would like to conclude by thanking the team of SKeyes, for their excellent work, in Lebanon and in the region. I would also like to again express my gratitude and appreciation for those who struggle for the basic and fundamental rights of freedom of expression on a daily basis. Words are powerful tools to bring people to action; standing by them and supporting them when times are hard, showing the political will, that is also *real action*.

I wish you good results for today's and everyday's work.

Thank you.