

**Speech by Ambassador Angelina Eichhorst,
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Conference "Election Coverage – New Challenges, New Trends"
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 “Election Coverage – New Challenges, New Trends”." I feel honoured to be among many prominent figures of Arab, European and American media as well as noted participants in political campaigns, coming many from far, to participate in what I am sure will be an insightful debate on media and elections.

While it is impossible to have democracy in a country without genuine elections, the democratic process extends beyond Election Day. Democratic governance requires an active and informed citizenry, and the media play a vital role in providing citizens with information they need to exercise their right to take part in governmental and public affairs.

At election time, the role of media is particularly essential: they have a duty to report impartially, sensitively and responsibly, ensuring that

the people and the political parties can communicate their vision for the future with each other. The media has a role to inform the citizens about the competing political parties and their programmes and candidates, and to contribute to the formation of opinion of the electorate.

No one doubts the increasing power of social media in elections in Lebanon and in the rest of the world. Social media allow users to not only seek information but also interact with others through online expression; they offer new possibilities in terms of campaigning, enable to engage with otherwise disinterested portions of the electorate. They are changing the way politicians organize supporters, advertise to voters, defend against attacks and communicate with constituents.

This key role that the media play in terms of framing electoral issues calls on all states to adopt measures supporting free expression during elections. Such measures should contribute to create an environment in which a pluralistic media sector can serve as one of the guardians of a free and fair electoral process, ensuring the transparency that is crucial for people's confidence in the elections.

The Lebanese Supervisory Commission for Electoral Campaign created for the 2009 elections represented an important milestone in this sense, being the first body in Lebanon established for supervising two crucial sectors of the election campaign: the media and campaign

expenses". Its role was unanimously acknowledged as a unique experience that managed to set up, for the first time and in a very short timeframe, mechanisms for financial supervision and media monitoring of the campaign. However, its role was limited to "investigation, warning, and referral", which did not allow it to fully prevent or rectify violations.

Time has come to do more: to ensure sound media regulations for electoral campaigning but also to bring the Lebanese electoral framework closer to international standards and implement the recommendations of international observers including from the European Union. Lebanon cannot and should not go backwards in electoral reform. The deadline to adopt the new electoral law as per ministerial declaration has expired and unfortunately debate on reform has focused almost exclusively on the specific issue of changing the electoral system. The debate on technical electoral reforms that can increase the transparency, legitimacy and fairness of the electoral exercise has not really taken place.

The European Union calls on all stakeholders to do all the necessary to adopt without delay a revised electoral framework that brings Lebanon closer to international standards. A new revised law should strengthen media and campaign regulations, but should also help to increase the number of women in Parliament (Lebanon has of the lowest rates in the world, at 2.3 % far less than the regional arab

average of 12%), should provide for an Independent Electoral Commission, increase the secrecy of vote by introducing uniformed official ballots (Lebanon is one of the few states not to have them) set the voting age at 18 and facilitate the vote of expatriates.

Allow me to say that democracy is, of course, about votes and elections and also about far more than that. What we in Europe have learned the hard way is that we need "deep democracy": respect for the rule of law, freedom of speech, an independent judiciary and impartial administration. The EU remains ready to encourage and support all those who want to root deep democracy in Lebanon.

My last words are of gratitude for the participants of this conference and for SKEYES, becoming by the day an increasing reliable and credible reference for freedom of the press and culture. The EU cannot be but proud of facilitating your everyday work as an active protector of journalists and intellectuals promoting freedom of expression in Lebanon and the rest of the region.