

## **Communication from the Euromed and the Media Taskforce to the Euromed Culture Ministers - Athens**

Good morning.

My name is Noha Mellor and I am a former journalist, now a senior lecturer in media studies at Kingston University in the UK

I am here today as a representative of the Euromed and the Media consultation, mandated by its Task Force to offer a regional media perspective on the matters you are discussing. On behalf of all involved in the Euromed and the Media process, I thank you for this opportunity.

Euromed and the Media extends the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue to include media practitioners and associated interests. Over the last three years, a total of 500 journalists and media professionals from across the region have joined in various discussions. These have included exchanges on potential solutions to common challenges faced by the media – both in the region in general and in establishing and protecting the highest standards of journalism within it.

The Task Force comprises around 40 media professionals from this process who meet to analyse and distil proposals from the wider discussions and provide an input to thinking on Euromed media matters.

Following the 2007 Berlin conference under the German Presidency of the EU, on the challenges of intercultural dialogue, an invitation was issued to our Task Force, who met in Ljubljana in March this year, to provide input to today's meeting: we believe that it is correct to see the media as a defining actor in intercultural dialogue and it is my privilege now to present our response.

### **RATIONALE**

Our rationale in making the proposals that I bring to you today is that

- We emphasise the threat posed by the absence of cultural dialogue in a global and wired 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is not only a matter of missed opportunities for human development but is the source of real and profound challenges and dangers to everyday life. We stress that this issue must be addressed with energy, imagination and urgency, reflecting its vital importance.
- We recognise the positive potential of exposure to cultural activities and of improving the media's presentation of the other, but stress that this positive potential can only be realised when audiences have sufficient understanding of the bases of the respective underlying cultures
- We recall to your attention the specific steps recommended in the report of the Berlin conference (which are attached to the printed version of this communiqué)
- We view the difficulty of achieving progress in many of these areas as being strongly influenced by the lack of a thorough, robust discussion of fundamental differences of perception and philosophy between cultures

- We believe that homogeneity of culture is not essential and that diversity is compatible with mutual understanding, respect and dialogue

## PROPOSAL

Since we believe that it is crucial to move swiftly from this message to action, we offer specific proposals and recommend corresponding urgent action.

First it is necessary to address the question of culture in respect of freedom of expression and ethical journalism, through a co-ordinated and exceptionally thorough initiative that will pick up many of the themes from Berlin:

- The focus of this would be a conference on the subject to be held where these issues are the order of the day: this should be a major city with a large multi-ethnic population
- There should be preliminary action through working groups and preparatory analyses, at both practical and philosophical levels, leading to a report of a quality and depth which gains it widespread readership beyond those directly involved
- As an input we see a need for commissioned research into how the "other" is portrayed and interpreted in the respective media; this would also have value as a benchmark against which progress could be measured.

The second recommendation covers measures to encourage and facilitate mobility and cross cultural exposure of journalists, especially young journalists. In particular, we suggest reducing barriers to travel, for instance through a special EU travel document for journalists from Neighbourhood countries.

We see this as part of a wider programme of action in which we trust governments will openly and loudly encourage national institutions, organisations and associations, all NGOs involved in culture, including state or public media, to engage in a real dialogue between North and South.

We welcome the continued support of the European Commission for the Euromed and the Media dialogue, and express our hope that, as it continues, the experience gained will provide a basis for additional initiatives that create genuine dialogue at a variety of levels.

## **DIGEST OF KEY POINTS FROM BERLIN CONFERENCE, JUNE 2007**

### Working groups

- Working group 1: media landscape – context and mechanisms
- Working group 2: governance and management
- Working group 3: red lines, taboos, self-censorship, personal threat
- Working group 4: reporting and representing the other

Participants were asked to consider the challenges of intercultural understanding for the media and what responses could be offered to meet these challenges.

### Aspects of challenges identified

Acceptance of need to improve intercultural understanding:

- between Islam and the West
- between EU and Arab societies
- between diverse groups in European and Arab societies.

The journalist's role as affected by the media environment in the region:

- respective owner interests in public and independent media
- under-developed commercial media structures restricting independent funding
- the effect of poor resources: lack of political or cultural context, leading to stereotyping
- general lack of enthusiasm for topics of inter-cultural relevance.

The journalist's role as affected by political factors in the region:

- politicisation of Middle East news coverage
- government restrictions on journalists' capacity for free reporting.

The journalist's role as affected by professional factors:

- difficulty in providing information without feeding prejudice, e.g. when reporting acts of violence or the ethnic origin of those involved.
- unsure of value of regulations (public) and codes of conduct (internal) on promoting tolerance: are they less binding in foreign reporting?

### Potential responses offered

Suggestions made for media professionals:

- Talk about ordinary people rather than about abstract ideologies or themes, e.g. Lebanese rather than Lebanon, Palestinians rather than Palestine.
- The need for pan-Arab media to tackle local issues, e.g. hospitals and education or how public funds are being spent, rather than focusing on grand themes and regional issues.

- Develop a code of conduct or guidelines on reporting the 'other' and on cross cultural issues. Revise or build on current codes (e.g. IFJ / EBU guidelines) not recreate.
- Bi-lateral ventures in joint coverage of 'stories' by Arab and European journalists and simultaneous publication on both sides.
- Attempt to harmonise terminologies used; cooperation to find a common language.

#### Suggestions made for media owners:

- Cultural diversity should be reflected in the number of Arab journalists working in mainstream European media and not only in Arabic services or in ethnic media outlets.
- Arab news media should learn how to reflect the rich cultural diversity within the Arab region, e.g. covering and giving voice to ethnic and religious minorities.
- Encourage new and different topics in EU news coverage; positive angles of the Arab world instead of focusing on the 'usual' negative aspects.
- Create partnerships for exchanging news / journalists / editors / local experts on media debates.
- Support journalism (training, editing manuals, exchange of skills) on intercultural matters. Joint training for European and Mediterranean partner journalists in intercultural competence, to improve the newsroom culture.
- Develop Training for Trainers courses on issues of cultural relevance, how to deal with crisis and stop the spread of prejudices (e.g. IFJ/FRA manuals on anti-discrimination).

#### Suggestions made for governments:

- Support public service broadcasting, which is facing a financial crisis in many countries. Make sure it is public and independent from the state. Editorial independence is crucial.
- Encourage commercial broadcasters not to sacrifice quality journalism. Consider joint ownership with journalists.
- Support the emergence of Community media – valuable in building bridges between communities/cultures.
- Foster networking projects among schools of journalism to ensure that the new generation of journalists are knowledgeable on Euromed issues.
- Avoid over-regulation – it should be restricted to the most extreme cases of incitement to hatred.
- Create a cross-country portal/forum for debate on intercultural matters, or build and expand on existing portals.

- Encourage private media owners and editors to be involved in the debate.
- Publicise current projects and expand them, e.g. the current initiative of exchanging TV programmes and features among French, Algerian and Lebanese TV channels.
- Consider the need for a Euromed ombudsman who can implement new shared ethical rules and ensure that European and Arab media adhere to them.
- Create a European sponsored prize in excellence in cultural dialogue.