



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

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Vice President - International Federation of Journalists

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

"Deterioration of Freedom of Media in OSCE Countries"

Testimony of:

Linda K. Foley

International Federation of Journalists

April 4, 2000

Chairman Smith and other honorable members of the commission: Thank you for allowing the International Federation of Journalists to present its views on the status of free speech and media in the OSCE countries.

By way of background, Mr. Chairman, the International Federation of Journalists, or IFJ, is the largest journalists' organization in the world. We represent unions and associations in more than 100 countries and in all member states of the OSCE including all the territories and republics of former Yugoslavia, Russia and the Caucasus region. Our member unions represent more than 300,000 working journalists within the OSCE.

In general, the IFJ believes OSCE countries must do much more to support media freedom and independent journalism. Transitional countries trying to create lasting and effective structures for democracy require more guidance on drafting and implementing laws and regulations that will sustain transparency, accountability and pluralism.

We have been following the work of the OSCE Representative for Media Freedom, Mr. Friemut Duve, and the annual report for 1998/1999. Although it includes a long list of interventions and visits, our view is that it does not provide clear and comprehensive strategies in support of independent journalism.

Because the OSCE Representative often develops strategies on his own without coordinating with journalists' organizations in the affected countries, the OSCE's efforts have not been as

effective as they could have been. Instead of operating independently, we believe the OSCE Representative should support programs and activities developed jointly by all journalists' organizations and professional groups that are striving for change within the new democracies.

As an example, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Duve could use his influence to promote truly independent public service broadcasting in these regions. In countries where the free market cannot sustain private broadcasting networks and where private broadcasters are controlled by a mix of economic and political interests, media are used as political and economic weapons. Russia is the most vivid example of this abuse.

Additionally, Mr. Chairman, we believe the Representative on Media Freedom should investigate the impact of media concentration and should speak out against media monopolies. In the United States, where free speech is codified in our Constitution, the alarming and escalating trend toward a few powerful corporations controlling all the major media threatens to undermine our valued national tradition of an independent press.

In his book, "Rich Media, Poor Democracy," noted communications expert Robert W. McChesney writes, "the media have become a significant anti-democratic force in the United States and, to varying degrees, world-wide. The wealthier and more powerful the corporate media giants have become, the poorer the prospects for participatory democracy.

"Behind the lustrous glow of new technologies and electronic jargon," he continues, "the media system has become increasingly concentrated and conglomerated into a relative handful of corporate hands. This concentration accentuates the core tendencies of a profit-driven, advertising-supported media system; hypercommercialism; and denigration of journalism and public service."

If media ownership concentration threatens democracy in the United States, you can imagine, Mr. Chairman, how it imperils democratic processes in those OSCE countries where citizens just recently received the right to vote. Already, media concentration is an issue of concern in Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, for instance, where foreign media owners dominate the private media scene.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, there's the issue of safety of journalists. According to the IFJ's annual report, 87 journalists and media staff were killed in 1999, many of them in OSCE countries.

Serbia continues to be a particularly dangerous place for journalists. Over the past two months the IFJ has seen an unprecedented assault on independent media in Belgrade. Journalists have been prosecuted, radio stations closed, newsrooms raided, transmitters silenced and hundreds of media workers have been fired and victimized.

As you know, Mr. Chairman, during the bombing of the former Yugoslavia last year, even NATO took aim at the media. The IFJ welcomed the misgivings expressed by the OSCE representative about NATO's willingness to make government media targets for bombing.

Still, a hysterical, concerted campaign of vilification against independent journalists in Serbia by the authorities there has created a dangerous situation, which, we fear, will silence all independent media voices for good. This grave situation has prompted the IFJ and other organizations representing editors, publishers, broadcasters and press freedom groups, including the Committee to Protect Journalists, to launch Prime Time For Freedom, a project that will provide solidarity and assistance to journalists, media staff and independent media organizations struggling to survive in the face of Slobodan Milosevic's onslaught.

We hope very much that the OSCE media representative will give his backing to this project, and we ask all OSCE member states to give their support to the professional campaign of solidarity. The international community cannot stand back as the Milosevic regime tries to wipe out journalists and media staff who defend democratic values and press freedom.

With this project, as with others, we believe the work of both the IFJ and the OSCE will be strengthened if the OSCE's representative listens to the voice of media professionals and supports the work of journalists' organizations in these regions. The journalists themselves are the only ones who truly understand the importance of press freedom. They are the ones who suffer the direct consequences of not having it.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman for this opportunity to address the commission and I'll be happy to answer questions.