

SUMMARY:

In a number of EU member states freedom of expression is under threat. Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index shows that several EU countries ranked

unacceptably low in terms of press freedom and freedom of expression. In this briefing the Minister for EU and democracy Birgitta Ohlsson explains the threats at home against the values and principles that

many European countries have long valued highly. She discusses restrictions on both freedom of expression and the threats to other democratic rights. According to the Minister the EU now has a lot to prove.

BRIEFING: The decline of freedom of expression and democracy in Europe

BY: BIRGITTA OHLSSON

From a name to a number. In March 1944 the number 78651 was tattooed onto the wrist of the 17-year-old French Jew Simone Jacobs when she arrived at Auschwitz with her family. The sole member of the family surviving, Jacob was alive at the end of World War one year later. It was on the ruins of the Holocaust, world wars and oppression that the EU was founded. Now, more than a half century later, Europe is facing an economic crisis. But we also have a political crisis. The growing gap between politicians and citizens has proved fertile for the growth of populist, anti-liberal and nationalist parties. The economic problems allow for a protectionist and xenophobic rhetoric. The EU's fundamental values are threatened when the tone towards minorities – particularly the Roma – has intensified in France, a severely criticised media law has been introduced in Hungary and the

authorities in Lithuania have threatened to put a stop to the country's first Pride parade.

Populist parties in Europe are growing rapidly. They have, on average, almost doubled their support over the last two national elections. And unfortunately this is a long-term trend. The sense of marginalisation in a globalising world makes the anti-establishment rhetoric take root. Faith in politicians and the state's ability to handle the current economic crisis diminishes with each failed bailout. It would clearly be desirable to have less government interference in the economy, both in the labour market as well as the economy and world markets. But for every democrat the electoral success of parties such as Lega Nord, Sannfinnländarna [the True Finns], Jobbik and Ataka should be viewed with concern. In reality these parties

are not run according to liberal values. Usually, they want a stronger nationalist government that closes borders, reduces multilateral cooperation and creates differences between people.

The weak economic performance and the feeling of many that the EU is an elite project are two of the greatest threats to the liberal vision of a tolerant and prosperous European Union. Ensuring conditions for economic development is crucial to be able to defend the future of our Union. Will we stand for openness or isolationism in the future? Will Europe once again become the world's leading financial centre?

Think of Singapore, Shanghai and Seoul 20 years ago. What did they look like then? Then think about where they are today. And then think about where they will find themselves in 2020. What do we want Europe to

look like then? Or Stockholm? More cars are produced in China, Japan and South Korea than in all countries in North America and Europe together. If we are to compete globally in the future, we need to invest long term and future-oriented, where the EU budget moves from passive farm subsidies to investments in research, innovation and education.

The Economist creates an annual global democracy index, which includes political rights and freedoms. The vision of a Europe based on freedom and openness must surely be that all member states should belong to the world elite in terms of democracy. Therefore, it is very disturbing that 19 of 27 member states come in a lower position in 2010 than they did in 2006. Human rights are not only crucial values in themselves. In societies where they are respected it is more difficult for corruption to take root. Corruption does not only damage democracy but has also contributed to the economic crisis that is now shaking Europe. After the Arab Spring of freedom, we must not forget the value of positive role models for spreading democracy in the world.

The EU is constructing a common foreign office to be completed in 2013. The foreign office brings together Europe's resources on the foreign and security policy for the EU to act more coherently and with greater weight. The EU now has a lot to prove. If

we cannot live up to human rights at home, how can we credibly criticise totalitarian regimes when they oppress their people? How can corruption be effectively revealed if media laws stand in the way of investigative journalism?

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Press freedom threatened in EU member states

We note that freedom of expression is currently seriously challenged in some EU countries. The organisation Reporters Without Borders has repeatedly expressed concern over the deteriorating press freedom in several EU countries. And, unfortunately, the 2010 Press Freedom Index confirms these fears. While some individual EU countries are flying the flag of freedom, 14 states in the Union are classified as unacceptably low. France has fallen to 44th place and Italy to 49th place. Romania follows closely at 52nd place. Greece and Bulgaria fall even further down and share 70th place with Benin and Kenya. Although, on average, no dramatic changes have occurred in Europe over the past decade, it is, nevertheless, still a matter of concern that we can see a clear downward trend. The EU is far from homogeneous in terms of press

freedom and the gap between member countries continues to grow. The EU risks undermining its position as world leader in respect for free speech.

At the turn of 2010-2011 Hungary took over the rotating EU presidency. On the same day they presented a media law which has been likened to a potpourri of the worst parts of the media legislation in the EU. Only Belarus and Russia in our continent have laws which we can compare to the worst abuses of the Hungarian Media Act. The European Commission has severely criticised the legislation and Hungary has been forced to back down on a few points. But there is still a media council appointed by the parliament which is dominated by the governing conservative party Fidesz and monitors all types of media. The European security organisation OSCE has called the council's concentration of powers unprecedented among European democracies.

There are clear links between press freedom and the EU enlargement and cooperation with neighbouring states. EU enlargement is a foreign policy success. Uniting Europe by bringing together countries that were formerly on opposite sides of the Berlin Wall is a historically outstanding achievement. In the spring of 2008, Sweden and Poland started an initiative to develop closer relations with the countries closest to the border of the EU to the East: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia,

Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus. This Eastern Partnership was launched at a summit in Prague in May 2009. Belarus, Ukraine and Azerbaijan belong to the group with very poor press freedom in the global comparison, according to Reporters Without Borders. Ukraine's deteriorating press freedom is apparent since the newly elected president Viktor Yanukovich took office. An example of this is the disappearance of the editor in chief Vasyl Klymentev. In one year, Ukraine has fallen from 89th place in the world to 131st place. Thus, the country is back in the same relative position that they had in 2003, before the Orange Revolution.

According to the Press Freedom Index, the situation in Ukraine over the past year is similar to that in Iraq and Cambodia. The countries of the Balkans, all of which have stated ambitions to have closer relations with the EU, and eventually to become members, are on a scale from Bosnia Herzegovina in 47th place to Serbia in 85th place and Montenegro in 104th place. That puts Montenegro in the company of the African countries of Angola and Niger. In the 2010 report on the state of accession negotiations, the European Commission presented a divided picture of free speech in Turkey. On the one hand it was argued that debate has become more open and free. On the other hand, Brussels described a long list of signs of

increasing restrictions and repression. It is sad that more or less harmless jokes about Kemal Ataturk could still be regarded as criminal. Between May 2008 and November 2010 YouTube was blocked because there was a video that was considered to be a "crime against Atatürk".

The EU must also protect press freedom to be a counterweight to Russia in Eastern Europe. The murder of Anna Politkovskaya is probably the most famous assault on press freedom in the country. Since the Wall fell 20 years ago, more journalists have been killed in Russia than anywhere else. In the last decade, 200 journalists have been murdered and thousands beaten. Most of those killed are relatively unknown journalists from the media in regions far from Moscow.

The EU has a duty to keep the torch of press freedom high in a world where a majority of humanity cannot voice opinions, thoughts and beliefs freely.

The high figures are a clear indicator of the lack of freedom in the country. But perhaps the biggest lack of freedom is not being able to write the whole truth; that journalists are forced to limit themselves by an enforced self-censorship. Freedom of expression must be preserved for future generations. The EU has a duty to keep the torch of press freedom high in a world

where a majority of humanity cannot voice opinions, thoughts and beliefs freely.

Weak protection for freedom of expression and minority rights

In the Europe of 2012 it may still be highly dangerous to go hand in hand with the one you love. Across the EU member states lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people face prejudice and oppression. This is in direct conflict with EU values. A report from the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights from 2010 shows that the protection of LGBT human rights is disjointed in EU countries.

The three main problems within its borders are violence, discrimination and invisibility. While several countries of the Union are moving forward, others are still at a standstill or are even moving into reverse. Ensuring that Pride parades can take place is an important support for the principles of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and non-discrimination. But these principles are not respected by all member countries. When a gay pride parade was held in Helsinki last year, a well-planned attack on the parade caused injuries to about 30 people. In 2009 the Lithuanian Parliament introduced a law banning the promotion of homosexuality by a large majority. And the following year some 50 Lithuanian parliament members signed a petition to stop the first Pride parade in Vilnius. The Lithuanian

Prosecutor General then withdrew the demonstration permit, but at the last moment, the parade was allowed to take place, largely due to massive criticism from the outside world. In 2009 the Baltic Pride came close to not taking place in Latvia. And just as in Lithuania, the demonstration permit was suddenly withdrawn by the authorities. An independent court, however, reinstated the permit. As in Lithuania international pressure was also important in this case.

In Europe today, it is not just LGBT people who get their human rights trampled on. Other minorities are extremely vulnerable. In Hungary it is not only the situation of press freedom which is worrying, but the treatment of the Roma is also alarming. The Roma are the largest ethnic minority in Europe and have been oppressed and derided for centuries. In Romania, Roma were even held as slaves up until the 1800's. In Hungary, in recent years, several Roma have been murdered. Meanwhile the antiziganist party Jobbik has been created and gained increasing voter support.

Jobbik has a paramilitary wing, the Hungarian Guard, which continues to operate despite having been banned. Among other things, they have marched in uniforms through Roma neighbourhoods and portrayed Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals and communists as a threat to Hungary. Jobbik initiated the pan-European organisation of

right-wing parties which was formed in October 2009 in Budapest, the Alliance of European National Movements (AENM). As well as Jobbik, the alliance consists of the British National Party, Belgium's National Front, Italian Fiamma Tricolore, French National Front and the Swedish National Democrats.

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Clearer requirements for respect for human rights

In Europe, we must set clearer requirements. Just as leadership, vision and energy are needed to create order in EU countries' economies, the same is required in terms of increasing respect for human rights. It is not credible to support the reform of the Arab Spring or demands for democracy as part of development policy when EU member states at the same time are allowed to trample on human rights.

Article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty states that European construction is based on freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law and respect for human rights and human dignity. Article 7 makes it possible to take action against member states that violate the EU's funda-

mental values. Ultimately this can lead to suspension of certain rights of member states, including the right to vote in the Council of Ministers. Back in 2003 the European Commission issued a public statement on Article 7, with a strong ambition to monitor the fundamental rights and respond rapidly to breaches. The document notes that the European Commission have both increased responsibility and increased power. Unfortunately, the ambition is largely unrealised. There is not yet any systematic review through the central EU bodies.

In order to increase respect for human rights, it is clear that something must be done. Two suggestions are:

- A transparent rating system that shows how well the EU member states live up to the treaty's fundamental values and the Charter of Fundamental Rights.
- A system of penalties to ensure that EU Member States respect basic human rights. In cases in which a country grossly violates their commitments on the protection of human rights, the European Commission should take action, for example, by financially punishing the country.

Implementing these two proposals would be a first step towards the realisation of a union of values. Anyone who cares about the future of Europe must preserve fiscal sustainability while forcefully safeguarding our fun-

damental values.

In the introduction I mentioned Simone Jacob who was given the number 78651. Her mother, father and brother did not survive the Holocaust. But Simone survived the death camp at Auschwitz. Today she is known as Simone Veil, who became Europe's first president since the European elections were introduced in 1979, the

first female minister in the history of France and who ensured that French women had the right to free abortion and contraception like birth control pills. The number 78651 is now engraved on a sword along with the French revolutionary motto: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. Veil received the sword when she became the sixth woman in 375 years to be elected to the French

Academy. As populist and protectionist winds blow across Europe, it is useful to recall Simone Veil's wise words:

I put my hope in Europe, a Europe that has overcome hatred and barbarism, which is committed to achieving peace and solidarity between the peoples of Europe.

PORTRAIT OF THE WRITER:

Birgitta Ohlsson is the Minister for the EU and democracy. The basis for this briefing was The Stockholm Free World Forum's first Politkovskaja lecture. These lectures consist of a series of seminars on freedom of expression where Birgitta Ohlsson was the opening speaker.

Photo: Johan Ödmann



This is the Stockholm Free World Forum's first briefing paper in 2012.

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