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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
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Address
by
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of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

at the opening of the European Seminar
to Promote Pluralistic and Independent Media

Sofia (Bulgaria), 10 September 1997

Your Excellency the Vice-Prime Minister and
Minister of Education and Sciences,
Mr Representative of the Secretary-General of the
United Nations,
Mr Representative of the United Nations in Bulgaria,
Distinguished Members of the Panes,
Excellencies,
Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First and foremost I would like to express my gratitude to the Authorities of Bulgaria, who agreed to host this Seminar and have actively contributed to its organization. My thanks also go to the United Nations Department of Public Information, the United Nations Development Programme, the American Government, the Open Society (George Soros), the Free and Democratic Bulgaria Foundation, and the International Programme for the Development of Communication of UNESCO, without whose financial support there would not have been so many of us here today. I also wish to express my gratitude to the members of the consultative committee from the professional media organizations who helped us to set up the programme of this conference and to select the participants.

As we open this seminar today, my thoughts go back to the informal Round Table which some of you attended at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris in February 1990, just three months after the fall of the Berlin Wall. While Soviet regimes still held sway in many Central and Eastern European countries, the round table brought together for the first time some 80 journalists and editors from newly independent media of Central and Eastern Europe and from the media of Western Europe and North America. This pioneer initiative, which explored ways of providing urgently needed help to the newly independent media in the region, and which set the guidelines for UNESCO's action in this respect, was a clear sign of the commitment of the Organization to furthering the democratic processes in Central and Eastern Europe.

The indisputable success of that Round Table certainly gave new impetus to UNESCO's work for the development of independent and pluralistic media in both the public and private sector and encouraged us to continue along the same lines in other parts of the world - firstly in Africa (Windhoek, Namibia, May 1991), then in Asia (Almaty, Kazakstan, October 1993), in Latin America and the Caribbean (Santiago de Chile, May 1994), and in the Arab region (Sana'a, Yemen, January 1996). The four Declarations and the corresponding plans of action adopted at those meetings have become real milestones in UNESCO's struggle for freedom of expression and of the press. Furthermore, two important proposals made respectively in Windhoek and Santiago de Chile became realities: in December 1993, the United Nations General Assembly decided to proclaim 3 May "World Press Freedom Day", and

this year I was privileged to award in Bilbao the first "UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize".

UNESCO, as the intellectual arm of the United Nations, has many tasks but only one mission: peace, to build peace, to prevent war, to avoid violence, to save succeeding generations - as stated at the beginning of the United Nations Charter - from the scourge of war. And there is no peace, no sustainable peace, without development, without better sharing, without justice. Likewise there is no justice without freedom of expression. Freedom of expression - the basic pillar of democracy - is particularly fragile in societies in transition, and the conditions in which the media operate in this transitional period are extremely challenging. This remains true for Eastern and Central European societies, which are confronted with urgent needs. The most crucial requirements today include:

- building up pluralistic and independent media - public and private alike - to replace the former monopolistic state-controlled news agencies, newspapers, and radio and television networks;
- transforming media legislation unsuited to democratic requirements;
- providing the skills and know-how to meet the challenges of a democratic and competitive society, including new areas of specialization such as marketing, advertising, media management and public relations.

Experience rapidly showed that the practice of democratic communication faced many obstacles. Among the most important needs were these: well trained media managers, in both the public and the private sectors; political leaders attuned to the democratic communication process and respecting the independence of the media; journalists versed in using public and private sources of information with accuracy and fairness, without compromising their independence. Then there was the problem that independent media enterprises were, and often still are, in a very precarious situation in most of the new democracies. The lack of professional experience, modern equipment, efficient channels of distribution and newsprint often represent difficult hurdles to overcome.

Mr President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Another vital matter which will feature in your round-table discussions is the question of how to adapt national media legislation to the new democratic principles prevailing at the

political level. Until this is done, the temptation is great for the new political leaders to make use of old legislation to limit press freedom and to take control of the electronic media, which in many countries remain a state monopoly. Journalists' work is impeded or delayed when laws dating back to previous political systems still regulate core components of media freedom such as access to public information or protection of sources. Laws on defamation, privacy and libel are all too often used to justify a certain degree of indirect censorship. While it is true that most countries in the region have already adopted favorable media legislation, its application is often very limited.

This Seminar will also explore the issue of violence against journalists and media staff and property. The newly acquired freedoms in all countries of the region have provided an opportunity for organized criminal groups to emerge and operate. Transition from full security and no freedom to full freedom and no security leads to these situations. Therefore, although violence against the media coming from official sources has greatly diminished in the last few years, we must urge governments and other authorities to co-operate fully in order to free the media from the threat of criminal violence and allow the media to operate without intimidation in a safe environment.

While some countries in the region have made impressive progress and have come close to consolidating a democratic society and a culture of peace through the rule of law, others have found this road to be more difficult and complex than they have foreseen and are taking longer to reach these objectives. All too often, transition has rekindled long suppressed or forgotten rivalries and conflicts, particularly in the form of ultra-nationalism and other types of extremism based on ethnic, religious, social and other divisions. Not far from here, many people have died as a result of tragic civil wars. The situation of minorities in many of the countries of Europe, East and West, is certainly a cause of concern. The media have been caught in the middle of these conflicts and, in some instances, willingly or unwillingly, have used their communication function to promote exclusion, discrimination and violence. The classic reaction is to call for limits on media freedom. I believe that this Seminar, covering a region that has been greatly affected by problems of this nature, will provide an excellent opportunity for an exchange of views and analysis and will undoubtedly reaffirm that the only solution for the maladies arising from freedom is more freedom. Similarly the only solution for the pathologies of democracy is better democracy.

Of course, Ladies and Gentlemen, the freedom that the media enjoy in the Western part of the European continent, as you will surely see during this seminar, is not entirely without obstacles and difficulties either, and these need to be addressed as well. The worrying trends towards an excessive concentration of media

ownership - I must emphasize this - are particularly threatening to the idea of pluralism and diversity of views. The question of ethics and behaviour of some media outlets has also provoked many debates in Western European media circles.

The United Nations Department of Public Information and UNESCO have convened this Seminar to analyse what has been achieved and what still needs to be done to promote independent and pluralistic media. It is the last of the series that began in 1991 in Windhoek. Local circumstances have been taken into account in every case. But these meetings that today culminate in this gathering in Sofia have also had a universal character. For the fundamental aim is the same everywhere: to ensure the media are free and independent, accurate and objective in both the private and public sector. This week in Sofia, we shall aim to achieve the same goal. The number and diversity of participants, who have come from every region of Europe and beyond, reflect the widespread interest in the themes of this Seminar. This is as it should be, since the promotion of independent and pluralistic media, not just in Europe but around the world, is relevant to every society and every community.

Mr President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I started by saying that our mission - we have plural tasks we have but one mission - is to build peace in the minds of men. And without the media there will be no education for all throughout life, we will be unable to reach the unreached, include the excluded and therefore we shall be unable to build peace in the minds of women and men.

Education is much more than information, is much more than instruction. Education is to provide all human beings with the capacity to shape their own futures. Education is to give each human being the personal sovereignty over his or her life. When all human beings have access to education, then they will become real, participating citizens.

Citizens, as I like to repeat, are counted in the polls but all too often do not really count in their everyday lives - and democracy is when the citizens count and participate. If I do not participate, I do not exist as a citizen. Therefore, we need the media, and we appeal to the media to help us to educate, to reach the yet unreached and to be in the forefront of the struggle against violence. On the eve of a new century and millennium, we must recognize that violence has failed. The century that is now ending has witnessed many marvels in terms of scientific discoveries, innovations and inventions. We have been able, for example, to create fantastic new antibiotics and telecommunications systems. And we should profit from all we

have achieved through the use of the creative faculty that is distinctive of the human species.

But what have we done in practice ? We have used these fantastic technological advances to kill each other. We have paid the price of war and conflict in terms of the lives of millions of our young people. Indeed, we too often take peace for granted, forgetting all those who are killed to defend the peace we today enjoy. Likewise we forget all those imprisoned in defence of the democracy and the freedom we today possess. We must not take these gifts for granted any longer. We must now mobilize against violence. We must say enough is enough. We must say that we wish our children to go to school, wish to have hospitals, wish to safeguard our environment; and we must pay the price of peace as we have been paying the price of war. And for this mobilization we need the media since they are the voice of the voiceless. We must appeal to the media and to the municipalities and to the parliaments. Without them, political will at the highest level will not be sufficient. We need in particular the support of the parliaments within a democratic system if we are successfully to wage the struggle against violence and force.

Our ultimate goal must be the transition from the logic of force to the force of reason, from a culture of war and violence to a culture of dialogue and peace. The media are an essential pillar of the democracy that is a necessary framework for peace. Prevention must have its proper place within this framework. This morning I was speaking with the Minister of Culture of Bulgaria about the problem of the invisibility of prevention. What is prevented is typically not seen. A state of peace is not newsworthy, is not reflected in the newspapers. I like to repeat that to a small general who wins a small battle a large decoration is given. To the great general who prevents a great war, no decoration is awarded. Good governance must increasingly imply making visible the invisible. The media have an important role to play here. They must not only be the voice of the voiceless, not only help to reach the unreached, but they must play their part in the campaign to prevent violence - as newspapers proprietors and editors of Latin America and the Caribbean did in Puebla in May when they affirmed their commitment to a culture of peace.

Another danger I would like to mention briefly is that of standardization. Increasing concentration in the ownership of the media can lead to a single mode of thought, to one language. There is a real danger of telecommunication technology producing a monoculture. But was this true of Gutenberg's invention ? No. One can imagine before long a worldwide telecommunication network employing many languages and scripts - including Cyrillic of course! What really matters in the last resort is the software - as Bill Gates is well aware. We have been struck by the generous

grant of Mr Bill Gates, through Microsoft, to the school libraries of the United States. I would very much like to imagine that before long UNESCO and Microsoft might be associated in providing similar opportunities to all the teachers of the Third World.

Freedom of expression and the media does not concern one country or region: it is global, a universal and basic human right. Solutions to all the problems which hamper media freedom can and must be found. I am confident that, as in the previous Seminars, this meeting, with its impressive array of participants, will go a long way towards finding solutions. I have good reason to think that the "Sofia Declaration" - should you decide to draft and adopt a "Sofia Declaration" - will be endorsed next month by UNESCO's Member States at the twenty-ninth session of the General Conference. The issues you will address over the coming days concern all of us, in Europe and elsewhere, and finding the appropriate answers to these questions will not only benefit media institutions and professionals but will also strengthen peace, democracy and human rights in general. I wish this Seminar every success in its deliberations.