

US Ambassador on the Bulgarian media

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Statement by Ambassador James B. Warlick, made at the roundtable on media, organized in Sofia on June 18, 2010, by the Konrad Adenauer and the Democracy Foundations.

I am honored to be invited here to join in the discussion of this important issue. As an American diplomat, I pride myself on the historical role my country played in championing the ideal of the free press. As an American citizen, I recognize that I cannot take this freedom for granted. Every generation must be ready to fight against new challenges to their political freedoms. When the American colonies gained their independence, the chief threat to press freedom was interference or even oppression from the government – something many of you here today have experienced personally. Over the past 20 years, Bulgarians – particularly Bulgarian journalists - waged a courageous struggle, and we see the result today in the many newspapers, magazines and broadcast media stations.

But we are here today because – despite the variety at the newsstand and the many channels of cable TV – we share a concern about disturbing trends affecting media freedom. In the 21st century, most challenges to free and independent media do not come from a late night knock on the door. The threats are more subtle, but still very serious.

As I listen to Bulgarians discuss this problem, there are a couple of issues that surface again and again. One of these is the lack of transparency in media ownership, and the acquisition of media outlets to advance a political agenda – or commercial interests. Some owners are not in the business of real journalism - providing objective reporting to serve the public good. Their goal is not to inform public opinion, but to manipulate it for profit or power. Ask yourself: why did some Bulgarian newspapers change their political leanings overnight after last year's elections? Were they motivated by a sincere change of heart – or just a desire to curry favor with the new government?

It is not just about ownership – editors and producers have a responsibility to be independent and ensure that all voices are heard. It is a fact that some editors have been influenced by political pressure and even financial incentives.

And it is also about the journalists themselves, who watch silently and do nothing. Many talented journalists are frustrated and discouraged but are afraid to speak out. But who will speak for your

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profession if you won't defend yourselves?

This situation is even more troubling outside Sofia, where political and business interests combine to pressure and even threaten journalists, and prevent reporting that is critical of local government and business leaders. This manipulation of the media is as dangerous to democracy when it happens in the countryside as when it happens here in the capital.

Bulgaria is not alone in facing this problem; many countries, including my own, deal with similar issues. Around the world, the difficult economic climate has made it even harder for genuinely free and independent media to flourish.

Nonetheless, I hope that today we can discuss some concrete steps Bulgaria can take to safeguard free and independent media, because this is not just some luxury we can live without. One of our greatest presidents, Thomas Jefferson, said, "Were it left to me decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate to prefer the latter." And he also said, "Our liberty cannot be guarded but by freedom of the press." The media serve a noble purpose: to inform citizens, to foster open debate on government policies, and to expose corruption. Even when the press is imperfect — and we understand that nothing is perfect — it plays an indispensable role.

To encourage our discussion, I'd like to suggest some ideas for attacking this problem. These are not meant as prescriptions, but as the starting point for debate and discussion. In my experience, there are three important tools a society must use to deal with challenges like this one.

First, there must be a strong legal framework to protect our liberties. In the US, we do not rely just on the constitution's protection for press freedom. We have, in addition, laws that require public disclosure of media ownership. Like most countries, we have some media organizations that are strongly identified with one political party or political philosophy. But the public must have the right, and the ability, to know who really owns the newspaper they read and the radio stations they listen to. It's up to the consumer then to make an informed choice about how to interpret the news provided by a partisan source. We have laws that limit the ability of one owner to monopolize the media market in a given community. These laws must be regularly updated to respond to new economic realities and technological changes, such as the internet, and they are not perfect. But we have vigorous public debate and citizens' involvement in the process, including in monitoring enforcement. When journalists are threatened, intimidated and sometimes even attacked, they should have confidence that law enforcement officials and the courts will come to their defense.

But law alone is not enough. You cannot legislate honesty. To ensure honest reporting, journalists, publishers and media owners must adhere to ethical standards. In recent years in my country, journalists have uncovered and publicized many unethical practices by their fellow reporters, and newspapers have had to publish exposes on their own editorial failures. We have seen the growth of organizations which maintain websites that provide rigorous, objective fact-checking of media reports. Famous, award-winning journalists have been publicly shamed and even fired for ethical lapses. In the current economic climate, I understand that it is especially difficult for journalists to resist offers of

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bonuses to publish favorable stories. It is hard for a journalist to risk his job to stand up to pressure from a politician or a publisher who wants him to write a biased story. No country, including my own, is free of self-censorship and editorial interference. If journalists, however, want to be respected as professionals, then they must work together toward a broader adherence to high ethical standards. Journalists, with their professionalism, integrity and stands of objectivity, are the champions of the free press, and the most important barrier to censorship and interference. Remember also the lesson of the early Bulgarian leader Khan Kubrat: one stick is easier to break than a bundle of sticks. Dedicated investigative journalists should be able to rely on their professional organizations for vigorous and principled support when they are under pressure. Civil society, as well, should find ways to support independent media and responsible journalists.

Because professional ethics is not enough. The citizens are ultimately responsible for protecting their own rights in a democratic society. The public may be cynical about the daily workings of media organizations – we all understand that. But the public should not lose faith in the ideal of the free press – that guardian of our liberty that Jefferson praised. Citizens can use their vote to oppose politicians who threaten journalists and who abuse their power to limit media freedom. They can demand higher standards from the newspapers they buy, and better laws from their parliaments. Political parties and NGOs, as representatives of the citizens’ interests, are particularly important in this battle.

Finally, I’d like to repeat that Bulgaria is not alone in dealing with the challenges to independent media. Political and economic pressures affect us all, and in every country media owners face the temptation to betray the fundamental interests of democracy for short-term profit. There is rich experience in the international community you can draw on to fight that trend. Foundations, like the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, can offer support. Many countries, including my own, offer training and professional development opportunities in media. If Bulgarians have the political will to tackle this problem, they will not be alone in the struggle.

So, I look forward to our discussion later on, and I thank you again for the opportunity to be here today.

The statement's text, as delivered, is published on the Embassy website in English and in Bulgarian.