

Press Freedom Walk Sierra Leone 2022

Freetown, 7 May 2022

Statement by EU Ambassador Manuel Müller

Hon. Vice-President,
Hon. Deputy Minister of Information,
Our dear friend and partner, Mr. Ahmed Nasralla, Chairperson of
the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists,
Dear friends from the media, civil society organizations, political
parties,
Dear colleagues, members of the diplomatic corps
Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

I'm very pleased to be here today, participating at this Press Freedom Walk 2022 under the theme 'Protect, Promote & Expand the Space', hosted by the Sierra Leonean Association of Journalists, with support from the European Union Delegation in Sierra Leone.

As you all know, this event marks this year's World Press Freedom Day, and celebrates the repeal of the criminal libel law in 2020, a very important decision, which set a positive dynamic and an enabling framework for freedom of opinion and expression, including press freedom, in Sierra Leone. This walk is also an opportunity to strengthen the commitment to respecting and protecting free speech and free media in the country.

Around the world, the European Union is strongly committed to protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, and of course freedom of expression and opinion, including press freedom, which is one of the hallmarks of a democracy. Vibrant media are vital to a healthy democracy, and a driver of good governance, development, human rights and peace.

On World Press Freedom Day, we pay tribute to the essential role of journalism in upholding online and offline freedom of expression in democratic societies and fostering transparency and accountability.

The voice of journalists is our own voice. When media remain silent, it is like societies themselves are muzzled: unable to hold the political and economic leadership to account or to grant people the right to make fact-based choices in life.

Today, the EU strongly reaffirms its continued support for the key role of independent and reliable media all around the world. Press freedom is a right, not just of media professionals, but of each and every one of us.

As we mark this year's World Press Freedom Day, if you allow me, I would like to speak briefly about what is happening now in Ukraine, in European soil, which reminds us of the essential role that journalists play in our societies, all over the world.

As the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell stated this week, brave journalists, camera crews, reporters, photographers and bloggers are risking their lives to keep us informed about Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine and its devastating effects for the country and its people, and they are being targeted, because of their work, by Russian forces. The EU is providing emergency support to media outlets and journalists covering the war in Ukraine.

By reporting from the front lines and shedding light on the gross human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law committed by the Russian armed forces, journalists importantly contribute to counter disinformation and information manipulation surrounding the invasion. They play a crucial role in ensuring that these atrocities will not remain unpunished.

In Russia and Belarus, despite the risk of long-term prison sentences and prolonged arrests, courageous independent media and individual journalists strive to inform about the war waged by the Russian leadership against Ukraine and the atrocities committed against Ukrainian people.

Like them, many independent and committed journalists and media workers around the world keep exposing injustice in their own countries and contribute to building a better future. Many of them despite daily harassment, violence and intimidation, both online and offline.

The European Union stands with them. Free press allows for a more democratic, stronger and inclusive society and is instrumental in the protection and promotion of human rights. We will continue to fight for press freedom and not pull back.

Also in Sierra Leone, the media is an active and key actor, and has a crucial role to play, in the governance, peace, democracy and development of this country.

The EU welcomes the historical decision to repeal the criminal libel law in Sierra Leone, a very positive step to protect and uphold freedom of expression and opinion, including press freedom. We acknowledge the instrumental role played in this process by the Government of Sierra Leone, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists and other civil society organizations, the Parliament and political parties.

Your presence here today is an affirmation of your strong commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms, peace, democracy and development in Sierra Leone.

Sierra Leone has made great progress in the last two decades to consolidate peace and democracy. There's still a way to go, and there's still work to do, but you have come so far as a people and a country. Building on the gains made over the years is only possible in an atmosphere of peace and respect to one another.

This is why it is important for each Sierra Leonean to reflect on how their actions or inactions, their words or silence have an impact on the country's peace. The way politicians and leaders engage on national issues; the way journalists, via their articles or talk shows, convey their messages and influence the public discourse; the kind of information social media influencers disseminate on their platforms – all of that should be taken into consideration.

Today the media is instrumental in influencing public opinion and decision-makers. The media can report relevant information in a professional manner, being critical when deemed necessary, hence contributing to the country's progress. But the media can also act as a propaganda tool, spewing inflammatory speech and hate messages, or even the famous "fake news" hence contributing to the country's destabilisation. I am sure you will agree with me that there are other ways to pass out a message without being inflammatory; and without using offensive, disrespectful or divisive words. I do think it is possible and necessary. I believe these reflections are particularly relevant as the general elections to be held in June 2023 get closer.

Public authorities, including the Government, Parliament, Judiciary and Security Sector, have a crucial role to play as regards press freedom. The European Union encourages public authorities, political parties and all relevant public actors to respect, protect and defend the vital space of freedom of expression and opinion, including press freedom, in Sierra Leone, every day.

The European Union is proud to support this event. I would like to thank our friend and partner, Mr. Ahmed Nasralla, Chairperson of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, for this initiative, as well as the team at the Political, Press and Information Section of the EU Delegation and Dr. Julius Spencer, Managing Director of Premier Media Group, for their work in support of SLAJ in the organization of this event. THANK YOU