Cilla Benkö speech at the Global Conference for Media Freedom
PMA session: “Under pressure – why public media matters”

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY!

First of all - thank you Public Media Alliance for inviting me to this very important session at this very important conference. Although in the middle of the summer holidays for me - I’m thankful for the opportunity to talk to you about a subject that matters more today than ever before: The role of independent media and especially independent public service media in democracies across Europe.

My view is clear - that role can hardly be exaggerated.

Impartial news and information that everyone can trust, a content that reaches all audiences and that reflects all views – that brings communities together. Never has it been more important.

I do not say this - only as the head of a large media company – I say this also as a citizen. I am concerned about the advance of authoritarian politics.

I have been working as a journalist for 30 years. It all started for me with studies in economics. But my interest in society, and in democracy, took me down a different path – to journalism. And I have never regretted that decision.

Nor have I ever been more convinced - than I am today - that our countries – and our democracies – need journalism, needs media freedom and needs public service media at its very, very best.

In Sweden, and across Europe and the world.

In my role as Director General of Swedish Radio and as a member of the EBU Executive Board - I often take an active role in discussions on freedom of the press, public service and the wider media’s role in democracy, both in Sweden and throughout Europe.
Sometimes it feels like pushing at an open door. When it comes to media freedom, everyone seems to agree!

Very few politicians openly say that they want to start chopping away at media freedom.

Nevertheless – exactly that is just going on in countries across Europe.

Reporters Without Borders’ annual Press Freedom Index shows a worrying trend. Several EU member states have plummeted down the list. An undeniable consequence of sweeping restrictions to media freedom.

These countries of course often dismiss the condemnation – the outside world is biased - and independent voices of criticism are tools manipulated by others for political gain.

None of that is true. But the narrative is an effective way of silencing the critics and avoiding necessary reforms to strengthen - rather than restrict - the freedom of the press.

It is easy to understand why increasingly authoritarian regimes want a public service that is more loyal to the power. It is a way of controlling the flow of news and avoiding criticism. It is a way of avoiding being exposed to critical views.

In the populist narrative - that has become more and more common - journalism has come to play an increasing role.

Free independent media are pointed out as part of the elite, media are pointed out as part of a liberal establishment - in opposition to the rest of society and which continuously serves its own interests – and independent media are referred to as tools for malicious people who want to do harm to their own nation.

By repeating these messages, both in Europe and across the Atlantic, populists look to devalue journalism’s opportunities to be an independent force that contributes to democratic life.

There are many ways to seek to control the media.

One is to pass draconian media laws that - in combination with media-authorities with far-reaching powers, - are able to impose high fines.
Another is to sack hundreds or thousands of journalists from public service corporations, replacing senior executives with government-loyal employees and manipulating those who are afraid of losing their jobs.

A third – is making it difficult for independent commercial media to survive by reducing their opportunities to earn money.

A fourth – is oligarchs loyal to those in power who buy up independent media and change their focus and mission.

A fifth – is that time after time, disparage independent journalists as tools for foreign interests, calling them traitors – and creating a climate that leads to hate, trolling and threat.

A sixth – is to transform independent public service corporations into cultural institutions.

All this may sound far-fetched but we now see how liberal democracy is challenged in a way that was hardly possible just a few years ago.

The attacks on free and independent media can only be seen as a part of this. Attacks on media institutions can only be seen as part of the devaluation of the checks and balances we usually associate with liberal democracies.

I note these elements across Europe with deepest concern - and I also note that so far it has not been done very much to try to stop the attacks on media in general - and on public service in particular. The risk is that we wait too long to act. That we sleep-walk through a gradual erosion to media freedom. That we miss the slow, and careful dismantling of a set of democratic ideals that matter greatly to all of us. The devil always lies in the details.

That is why I want – today – to make a clear call for action. A defense of public service media and the independence of the wider media should be made a high priority for all.

The advance of authoritarian tendencies now make this an urgent project. That is why today’s session is so welcomed.
As you all know public service represents a set of essential democratic ideals – for instance giving a voice to the voiceless - pursuing the truth without fear or favor – but also ensuring that the joys of culture and learning are available to everybody – and that is irrespective of income or background.

Research clearly states that people living in countries with strong public service media have greater knowledge about politics and society than people living in countries with more commercialized media systems.

But for public service to be able to be at its very best - a number of things are required.

1) True independence must be guaranteed. Declarations of the importance of free journalism are important but they are not enough - there must be legal structures that seriously guarantee the editorial integrity and independence of Europe's public service companies.

2) Long-term funding must be secured. Subjecting public service media to constant cuts risks undermining its journalism and ability to hold power to account.

3) The broad remit must be safeguarded. Narrowing the focus of public service media risks diminishing its relevance - and undermining its universality. An effective way to reduce the importance of public service providers - is to shrink their mission.

Can there be any doubt - given the developments I have just been describing - that we need more than ever to stand up for media freedom and the democratic ideals of public service media?

The lifeblood of a healthy democracy is the existence of free and independent media - and public service journalists pursuing the truth without fear or favor.

More than ever before, we now need to make sure there is a voice that can stand up for them.

Thank you!