

**Opening address of Ināra Mūrniece, Speaker of the Saeima,
at the “Second European Media and Information Literacy Forum”**

27 June 2016, Riga, Latvia

Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you in Riga and to the *Second European Media and Information Literacy Forum*! We are honoured to host this forum together with our colleagues from UNESCO, the European Commission, and other partner organisations.

We are particularly delighted to have you here - at the Latvian National Library. Libraries play a crucial role in promoting media and information literacy.

I would also like to note that our National Library hosted the *UNESCO World Press Freedom Day* in May 2015. The fact that we meet here again reaffirms the importance Latvia places on press freedom, quality journalism, and media and information literacy. It also shows how highly we value our cooperation with UNESCO in this regard.

The topic of this forum is of special importance to me personally as a former journalist. Today's media landscape is becoming increasingly complex. In early 90's, when I started working as a journalist for the newspaper *Latvijas Avīze*, we gained information from global agencies only by fax. Today we have digital media.

Digital revolution has created enormous opportunities and tremendous challenges at the same time. Information spread by modern media can pose danger to a free society. Media can be misused for populism and extremism. Media can spread disinformation and propaganda.

Why is it so dangerous? Because today we face a completely new security situation in Europe and its neighbourhood: terrorism threats, conflicts, and Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The ISIS recruiting propaganda and the Kremlin's propaganda are invading our information space. Manipulation of facts creates confusion and fear.

We see how vulnerable our open democratic societies can be. To deal with the complexity of challenges we need to work in the following areas: prevention, regulation, and media and information literacy.

What do we need to prevent, then? Media and media providers should follow the fundamental European values of democracy by ensuring that there is no hate speech and incitement to violence. Just one example from Latvia: on the 9th of May, Latvian public radio programme “Doma laukums”, broadcast in Russian, discussed the public petition of 12 000 citizens asking to remove the Soviet Victory Monument from the Victory Park in Riga. A woman called in the studio and stated that “it would be easier to eliminate the 12 000 people who signed the petition than the monument itself”. Surprisingly, the journalist's reaction was to praise the strong support to the Monument. In fact, the proper response would have been to reprimand the caller's words as hateful. The journalist had to explain to the audience that hateful statements are not acceptable and demonstrate better media literacy herself. The responsibility of any journalist is to prevent the incitement of violence.

We also need to regulate cross-border broadcasting, and – a point that is the most relevant to this Forum – we need to strengthen media and information literacy. We should empower our citizens with the skills necessary to understand how to use social and traditional media smarter.

Media and information literacy is crucial for any democratic society. Society has to be informed and then make conclusions on what is or is not true. Here critical thinking is absolutely necessary. The

most recent example of the importance of critical thinking was the British referendum, where the capacity to distinguish between objectively delivered information and lies was crucial to make an informed choice. Was it made?

We have many challenges, and there is no simple solution. Our efforts should combine national and international levels, and engage media professionals, along with civil society representatives and policy makers.

Ladies and gentlemen,

My own country Latvia faces these challenges in a very direct way. Therefore, the strengthening of independent media is high among Latvia's priorities. Currently, our Government is finalizing the new *Media Policy Guidelines*, which have a strong focus on media literacy. I am proud that the *Baltic Centre for Media Excellence* was established in Riga; it has already made a significant contribution to the training of journalists from the Baltics and beyond, as well as fostering media literacy. Also, we should redouble our efforts to engage schools to teach children critical thinking skills.

In this regard, we welcome UNESCO initiatives and efforts in advancing media and information literacy. I would like to note that the UNESCO Chair on Media and Information Literacy was launched at the beginning of this year at the University of Latvia.

Dear participants of the Forum!

Our work involves very complex issues. To come to the right conclusions, we need a debate on the best way ahead. We would like to ask you to make use of each other's expertise, wisdom and experience. I also hope that this Forum and its recommendations will provide a valuable input to the Global Media and Information Literacy Week events that will take place in Brazil this November.

Thank you for taking part in the Forum! I wish you fruitful discussions!