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CONFLICT PREVENTION IN THE MULTI-MEDIA AGE – THE EU'S ROLE IN THE WORLD

Conflict prevention in the multi-media age and role of the new technologies, the topic addressed by this week's *Deutsche Welle* Global Media Forum, is a subject that goes right to the heart of what the European Union does. I am very grateful to *Deutsche Welle* for giving me an opportunity to contribute to Forum's discussions this week.

We are living in a multi-media era in which the media are constantly diversifying and multiplying. Never has the media landscape changed so quickly or presented us with so many new opportunities – or so many challenges. The world of today has changed radically and it is continuing to change at a dizzying pace. It is a world that is interlinked, precisely because of the explosion of media technologies.

In this "global village" we are all connected day and night by satellite TV, mobile phones, instant messaging and Internet chat-rooms and news flashes around the world in seconds on a constant, 24-hour rolling news agenda. The threats, crises, dangers and disasters that face us are global in nature and they have to be tackled on a global scale. And this is what the European Union does.

The European Union was born out of one of the most tragic and devastating conflicts the world has ever seen – the Second World War. After that war, Europeans wanted to find new ways of working together to end the cycle of conflict and division.

That was a war in which the new communication technologies of the time had a major impact. The war impinged directly on the lives of people at home more than any previous war had done. This was not only because of the huge level of civilian casualties. It was also because news of the conflict was broadcast on cinema newsreels and on the radios in people's living rooms. So, though they had nothing like today's means of instant communication, ordinary people felt more connected to the fighting going on in other countries, and even on other continents, than they had in previous conflicts.

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A generation later, we have had soldiers sending pictures to their loved ones from Iraq on their mobile phones. This inevitably has an impact on the public perception of and support for wars being fought in their name and the conditions faced by their troops.

After the Second World War, Europeans came together by dismantling trade barriers and developing common polices which laid the foundations of a political project which has transformed Europe. They steadily increased the size of what is now the European Union from six to 12, then to 15, then after the end of the Cold War to 25 and now we are 27 Member States.

Since the European Union was founded it has enjoyed the longest era of peace and prosperity in its history – notwithstanding the current economic crisis. The EU now comprises 27 sovereign democracies, collectively numbering 500 million citizens. Only a short time ago many of these countries lived under dictatorships.

So Europe developed out of a project for peace and it is founded on its shared values of peace, democracy and human rights, as well as its common interests. It has developed not as a military alliance but on the contrary as an organisation dedicated to peace-making and peace-keeping. We want to promote our values and protect our interests but in the turbulent world of today, Europe cannot be an island of peace and prosperity and our values and our interests face challenges and threats.

These challenges and threats are portrayed constantly on our TV screens, discussed in on-line blogs and chat rooms, captured by the mobile-phone cameras of tourists or aid workers. We are assailed by images of human rights abuses such as the crack-down on monks demonstrating peacefully in Burma/Myanmar and the children killed or maimed by the fighting in Sri Lanka. We watch footage of the massive flows of migrants pouring across the Afghanistan/Pakistan border from the Swat Valley. We see graphic shots of pirate attacks in the Gulf of Aden. The list goes on.

The EU has developed a common foreign policy to project its values around the globe and to address these challenges. The size of its population, its GDP and its share of world trade make the EU an active global player with regional and global security interests and with responsibilities to match. No individual country in Europe can deal with these challenges on its own. By acting together we achieve much more in tackling the global economic crisis, environmental degradation, climate change, the scourge of international terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and regional conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The EU is at the heart of this security effort. It has moved on from building peace in Europe to building peace around the world. And the global interdependence of today means that others increasingly call on us for our help. This is a role that Europeans and non-Europeans alike want the EU to play. And we need the media as our allies in this to spread our messages, to explain what we do and to help us implement our policies.

The EU is responding to the calls for assistance from around the world. It is monitoring a ceasefire in Georgia. It is leading international efforts to stabilize and modernize the Balkans and to fight poverty in Africa and develop the African continent. It is training the Afghan, Iraqi and Palestinian police forces as they try to rebuild their societies. It has sent peacekeepers to Bosnia, Chad and Congo, at the UN's request. For us, it goes without saying

that foreign policy is not just about what we say. Actions speak louder than words. What we do, and how we do it, is what matters. And here, the role of the media in portraying and explaining what we do is fundamental.

The EU's security and defence policy — the operational arm of its common foreign policy — is all about crisis management. We use the full range of resources available to us — from diplomats to development workers, from judges to police and — where necessary to keep the peace — soldiers and indeed now sailors in our newest and first-ever naval operation patrolling the Gulf of Aden and the Somali Basin to protect shipping from pirate attacks.

Since 2003, the EU has initiated 23 crisis-management operations. Six have been military operations and the rest civilian. Some are police missions, some are border-monitoring missions, some are rule-of-law missions, involving a mix of police, judicial and penitentiary elements.

If actions speak louder than words, a picture tells a thousand words and images are the best illustration of all. When you see pictures on your TV screens of German or British police trainers in Kabul, for example, of a French or a Greek warship repelling a pirate attack off the coast of Somalia, of Irish troops helping to protect refugees in Chad, of Swedish border monitors in Georgia, of Italian judges in Kosovo — when you see images of people from different EU Member States working together in different EU Security and Defence Policy operations abroad — you really see what we are achieving together.

Our missions are our chief tool for communicating our policies and we try to ensure that we keep the media fully informed about what they are doing, with press and public information officers in every mission interacting with the press and media in the field, as well as back at base in Brussels.

In the age of the day and night news agenda and the instant sound-bite, we are constantly in the glare of the media spotlight and we have to be ready to respond with a pithy sound-bite at a moment's notice. The media both oblige us to be present and enable us to be present. When news broke last week of North Korea's nuclear test, for example, world leaders all reacted within hours. They had no choice.

The myriad of new and constantly developing communication technologies are changing the nature of news and the nature of journalism. They are changing the way information is passed and the way we interact with the media. We know how important our daily interaction with media professionals is. We want to help journalists do their work and we try to assist them in every way we can. We are as accessible to all our interlocutors as we can be, without discrimination, and we deal with the local, regional, national and international media. We know that it is important to interact with editors and proprietors as well as reporters.

There is no "one size fits all" communication policy. We have to tailor the way we work to the circumstances and needs. We have to be ready for robust and rigorous scrutiny but we also have to encourage journalists, in some places, to be more forthcoming with their questions rather than simply recording our statements.

We seek to be proactive — rather than merely responding with sound-bites — operating further upstream, in order to educate and explain to media professionals what we are doing in our operations, our policies and the way we work.

We know how important it is to develop our technical resources. We are constantly developing our website, in order to communicate directly with the public, and uploading clips of EU diplomacy in action and of the work of our different missions onto YouTube. The new technologies are making us all increasingly active players in the creation and dissemination of news. With the advent of interactive media, on-line publications, blogs, social networking sites, chat-rooms, instant messaging, Twitter, we can reach out directly to citizens, to voters. Look how successfully President Obama harnessed the power of the Internet in his election campaign. He understood how to use it to communicate with vital constituencies and to connect and mobilize his supporters.

The power of the new media is illustrated by the fact that access to the Internet is blocked or censored in China, for example. And I read last week that the Iranian government had jammed access to Facebook for fear of the power this new medium has to mobilise their opponents in the forthcoming presidential election. Cell phones and text messaging are said to have played a role in fostering the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and Twitter is thought to have played a part in rallying demonstrators in Moldova recently.

A much older technology – radio – has been used extensively and effectively by the UN as a means of communication in peacekeeping. The UN radio station in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Okapi, proved very successful in helping unite the people there after the civil war. But we must not be naïve – the power of the media can of course be unleashed for bad as well as for good. Who can forget the appalling role of Rwanda radio RTLM in triggering the genocide there by urging listeners to pick up machetes and kill "the cockroaches"?

The constantly evolving nature of the new media is increasingly blurring the distinction between audience and reporter, between politician and publisher, between citizen and editor. Anyone with a mobile phone just about anywhere in the world can be a citizen journalist and get his or her news directly onto an international TV bulletin. The execution of Saddam Hussein was captured by a mobile phone camera and viewed all around the world immediately.

Paradoxically, it can still be extremely difficult to get information. Recently, journalists have been barred access to Zimbabwe, to Burma/Myanmar and to Sri Lanka, to mention just a few examples. Reporting of conflicts is essential and journalists must be allowed to work unimpeded. But we must also remember that "in war, the first casualty is truth", to quote Aeschylus. This is just as pertinent in today's media age. If anything, it is more difficult now to ensure that the news and information about conflicts is objective. The plethora of information, the wall of pictures assailing us from all sides, do not necessarily tell us the real story. It can be difficult to sift through the mass of information and select the details that are important. There is a danger that the information we receive is more superficial, with less substance. Many people fear that proprietors' profit motives and the dictates of real-time information, in an age when scoops are a thing of the past, mean more headlines and less analysis. Late news is worse than no news and it is difficult for anyone to come out first with a statement or a reaction to a crisis and very difficult to come out first with a careful, considered response.

The new media are much more difficult to control and the old distinctions are increasingly dissolving. Questions arise about who has the authoritative version of events, who is responsible for editorial control, who owns the medium, where the limits of the newsroom lie. Doubts may arise about editorial quality and integrity. This raises serious questions about press freedom and about the future of journalism as a profession. And this in turn has repercussions for our conflict-prevention work.

We must and we do integrate media policies into our policy-making and implementation. We support training for journalists and the development of the media in post-conflict regions as an important strand of our development policy, which goes hand-in-hand with our conflict-prevention policy. We must do all we can to support journalism as an economically and socially viable profession and help provide protection for media professionals who often risk their lives reporting on armed conflicts.

Our media strategies includes seminars and training for journalists in the subject matter with which we deal, namely the conflict-resolution and peace-building processes of which our European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) missions are a key instrument. Journalism training must also address the issues of ethics and impartiality, for example of avoiding ethnic and racial discrimination and hatred in broadcasting and publishing.

"Peace journalism" is a concept that is gaining currency and I am sure that it will be discussed at this week's forum. Should we incorporate "peace journalism" into our conflict-prevention strategies? Yes, if this means striving to give as much impartial, quality information as possible to the press and media, in all their forms. But we should not forget the contentious debate over the New World Information and Communication Order and the concept of "development journalism". This came to be viewed by many as a form of journalism that was supportive and uncritical of Third World governments and could be regarded as code for forms of censorship.

We all want to promote peace, reconciliation and conflict resolution and we want the media to help us in this. The best way in which they can do this is to inform us. This is the journalist's fundamental task. The reporter is there to report. We should be careful not to weigh down the media with additional responsibilities over and above their primary task of providing information. A healthy media environment is diverse and plural; it is there to explain but not to take sides. The profession of journalism needs no justification and no sophisticated qualification.

The fundamental right of press freedom is enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Press and media freedom are a fundamental requisite for a free society. The media – especially the new media – make a vital contribution to conflict prevention by enabling dialogue to replace conflict. Free and independent media able to carry the widest range of news, information and opinion are essential for peaceful, stable, democratic societies. And that is what the European Union is about: helping to build peaceful, democratic societies.

