**Central regional conference of the SEE Media Observatory:**

“Media and journalism in South East Europe –

Captured by particular interests or turning to serve the public?”

**Tirana, 12-13 June 2014**

Session 5:

**Journalists - Victims or constituents of structures and relations which obstruct democratic role of the media?**

Presentation by speaker:

**Yavuz Baydar, Co-founder, P24 – Platform for Independent Journalism, Turkey**

I am honored to address this meeting in Tirana, organized by SEE Media Observatory, on behalf of Platform for Independent Journalism - P24, founded some 10 months ago in Istanbul.

There is no sidestepping the issue. What we are addressing here is a problem which we as journalists have helped created.

Journalists are themselves accomplices in the dismantling of our own professional obligations. These are to define the public good and public interest and by securing the public right to know. Our profession colludes with the political and financial powers that would restrict these rights.

I am thankful for the invitation extended by esteemed colleagues at the SEENPM, who work tirelessly to arrest the declining position of the Fourth Estate. The Balkan have become a test case for the proposition that democratisation is intrinsically linked to the independence of media.

Turkey, too, is in the midst of a struggle to ground the process of democratic normalisation and the role journalists play is essential to that outcome. Whereas in many spots in the Balkans the transition has slowed down or is even frozen, our ordeal in Turkey resembles that of Sisyphus, an uphill battle with all too predictable and sudden reversals. And, at the moment, it looks like a battle lost.

We operate in an environment in which the notion of solidarity, of compassion, of conscience have vanished. It was noticeable in a most concrete manner last year, when a journalist – be it reporter or editor or cameraman or columnist - was fired, arbitrarily by the moguls, who felt they have to abide by the will of the prime minister of Turkey. Each and every sacking has been met with silence, or even excuses, rationalisations, as if to suggest that he or she deserved such a punitive measure.

The indifference has shown itself even in the media which does not support the government and which allocates its sympathy not as a matter of principle but according to the ideological camp of the victim. As a rule the enemy of enemies deserve sympathy or at least a reaction and condemnation. Others' cases do not matter.

Sackings are on the increase. The threat of dismissal in Turkey, the Middle East and perhaps in the Southeastern Europe, has taken the place of other, harsher measures including imprisonment and physical threat.

In our environment, those who are fired simply because they defend their professional integrity, risk never being rehired. They are seen as toxic or as rogue elements; a threat to the political and financial powers that be.

More than 230 journalists have lost their jobs since early 2013. This contrasts to an earlier wave of dismissals or actual detentions of individuals victimised largely for Kurdish activism or dissent. This more recent round have one point in common: their commitment to defend journalistic values and integrity.

The ordeal of losing employment is compounded by professional isolation. The colleagues they leaver behind look the other way but more worryingly they are abandoned by journalistic organisations. My own admittedly random survey of colleagues who have been fired reveals that no lawyers from the Turkish Journalist's Association, (which is largest professional association in the the country), nor from other professional organisation had called them to offer help or even sympathy.

This is the result of a decline in commitment that has occurred over years and is symptomatic of a greater malaise.

There are various factors which make makes Turkish journalists complicit in their own professional decline.

One has to do with the confusion between political or commitment and the commitment to professional. For decades, editors in particular, worked under the notion that journalism served a greater purpose than just honest reporting: journalism was was supposed to have an ideological mission. It is of no surprise that the largest daily in Turkey, Hürriyet, comes out ever morning with a sub logo that reads “Turkey belongs to Turks.”

It is a common belief that national interests and founding state ideology should define the limits of journalism. Others, in different trenches that wave different flags practice the same sense of restraint. We now witness a centre-of-the-road media, whose members operate have the same missionary commitment and the same partisan approach.

The urge to protect the public realm from the noise of dissent or contradiction finds its reflection in the collective bodies, such as press council associations. They are led by people who share the same ideological values rather than a common, cross-the-board concern to raise standards and working conditions.

Rights for those who think like yourself, be you secular, conservative, leftist or Kurds, are not rights which have to be shared with other. Inclusiveness is not perceived as a virtue. Rather, difference is all too often as viewed with hostility, a threat to one’s very existence.

Turkish journalism also operates in an environment void is collective rights.

Only 1% of of an estimated 14,000-15,000 professional journalists in Turkey, are members of trade unions according to UNESCO and Reporters Sand Frontieres. The invisibility and inefficiency of the unions is the result of media moguls who have worked systematically to sidestep, hound or fire committed union members. Such attitudes have come to invest other outlets, such state-run TRT or Anatolian Agency, which once had a high proportion of union members. These members were among those to loose their jobs and many journalists in semi-state employ now belong to “official” yellow unions.

Let me also remind you that in Turkey's painful negotiations process with the EU, a number of chapters were blocked; some by France under Sarkozy, and some others by Cyprus. But there are three chapters that Ankara has refused to open: Chapter 5 on Public Procurement, Chapter 8 Competition. These are issues which a free and vigorous press might be expected to pursue – but don’t. When one adds that the third chapter Ankara refuses to open is Chapter 19, on Social Policy and Employment, this bleak picture becomes even clearer.

Lack of proper collective rights have eroded a sense of solidarity so badly, the fear of losing one’s job is so intense that newsrooms operate under a cloud of fear.

Owners are happy to rely on an under-qualified workforce. Quality and originality of thought bear no premium in an environment akin to an open air prison where journalists cling to their jobs. Obedience is the most sought-after virtue. The usual newsroom debates have been replaced by vertical management, which means employees are told what to print and not to print. Fear produces a lack of solidarity and a lack of editorial independence.

This system is built upon a basic principle: only those who prepared to rent or sell their freedom and independence have a future and these are the ones who are placed in the key top positions.

They become, what one lawyer described as *kapo*s, the concentration camp collaborators who kept order- which in this case refers to those who successfully implement a system of self-censorship.

We have now strong evidence of the details of how that system works. This has come from audio leaks of conversations between the prime minister and some media managers and between media managers themselves. The authenticity of some of these wire taps has been confirmed by the prime minister.

What has been occurring in Turkish media at an ever accelerated pace it that the genetic code of the sector, the DNA of the journalistic values is being dismantled. Journalists chose to be part of a profession that is based on submission to internal pressures, or, far worse, organised along the partisan ideological line. They attack each other on daily basis on a massive scale, trying to discredit what they see as the curse of diverse opinions. OK?

Media in Turkey has become a battlefield. It is regarded by one side as the natural extension of the executive branch. Others still refuse to see that the only remedy is to find a way to return to objective reporting. At the moment, journalism has been reduced to mere opinion; there are more than 400 signed columnists registering their take on events every day.

The deeper the crisis becomes, the sooner the day will come when journalist acknowledge the degradation of their profession and decide to do something about it. But we have not hit rock bottom yet.

The solution will not be easy if only because the current media order and its powerful stakeholders of government and proprietors are resistant to change

The road to reform will have to start with a revival of union activities and membership. Without this there will be no possibility of job security. Efforts to restore unity should have this as their primary focus.

Secondly, the EU should be alerted to the fact that unless Chapter 19 is opened, there can be little hope for that journalism will recover its public interest mission.

Endorsement of alternative ownership structures in private media becomes important. The only conventional print outlets that cling to independence are those which are structured as part of foundations, such as secular daily *Cumhuriyet*, or consortiums, which involve a large number of midscale businesspeople as donors or shareholders, exemplified by conservative *Zaman*. The resistance of such models to political and economic pressures are obvious.

The emerging alternative in financially declining conventional media milieu is the digital domain. Therefore, the dimension of crowdsourcing, engaging the society in constructing a quality journalism, is necessary, and possible.