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Madam Vice-Prime Minister,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues,

On behalf of UNESCO, I wish to welcome you to the International Seminar on “A New Strategy for Independence and Pluralism of the Media in Croatia”. We are organizing this event jointly with the Institute for International Relations in Zagreb, which I warmly thank for its friendly and efficient cooperation, with the support of the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Croatian Commission for UNESCO and the Croatian Journalists Association.

UNESCO’s intention in organizing the seminar is to facilitate the dialogue between media professionals and the Croatian authorities, with a view to supporting the development of independent and pluralistic media in Croatia.

I confess that I feel today much more comfortable than on my previous visit to Croatia a few years ago. At that time, the official presentation of the Croatian media environment made to me by the governmental representatives was in total contradiction with the realities I could witness on the spot: the media was not free, independent and pluralistic. It was totally under the control of those in power, directly or indirectly through their supporters and friends.

Since then, while the expectations of both the journalists and the population had been growing over the years of censorship and freedom limitations, the establishment of a new freedom for Croatian media has become paramount. The democratic elections last winter opened the way for radical changes in the media landscape of this country. This change has had of a significant impact on the democratization movement which is blowing over the region. This will open the way towards press freedom and freedom of expression, for which many of you have been fighting during the former regime.

In this respect, I would like to pay a special tribute to those of you who dared raise their voices against this non-democratic attitude and who sometimes paid a high price for resisting harassment and intimidation, be it administrative, legal or political.

Under the previous ruling power, the international community, including UNESCO, was unable to establish a fruitful dialogue with the Croatian authorities on press freedom, media independence and pluralism in your country. For this reason, UNESCO's action in Croatia was reduced to the provision of some technical assistance to independent media and to broadcasting TV programmes produced by an independent production company in Zagreb on a weekly international news exchange programme to raise the international awareness of the need to support independent voices in Croatia. The international community in general and UNESCO in particular, welcome wholeheartedly the political changes in Croatia in the field of media.

The aspirations raised by the recent changes should not be disappointed – and upholding the rule of law is not enough. The new legal and regulatory rules have to be just and should truly guarantee the independence and pluralism of the media. Freedom of the press cannot be a mere slogan. It cannot become a reality without revising the previous laws and their implementation.

Within this new framework, and in order to encourage new initiatives, the new Croatian authorities have already taken steps to meet European and international standards. UNESCO has been offering its assistance at the request of the Government to change the media law and provided its expertise in the drafting of new media legislation. In the near future, this organization is ready to support the transformation of the state media into editorially independent public service broadcasting and remains willing to support the establishment of new media infrastructures, which would significantly contribute to the development of media independence and pluralism in your country. However, I agree, any kind of assistance from any international community's body in favor of independence and pluralism will never be a substitute for your dialogue, collaboration and initiatives based on shared interests.

Given the magnitude of the task ahead, it has become essential that each actor in the Croatian media field be it state media professionals, private media journalists and managers, legislators, representatives of the Government, of the Parliament, understand each other's role in the new democratic society building. This is why the idea of such a seminar arose a few months ago.

We have two days to meet, discuss and exchange views and opinions about major issues related to the public; right to be informed and to press freedom. This seminar is meant to be an event in these transition times, to bring you together, to have each of you contribute to a democratic dialogue, thus paving the way towards democratic governance in Croatia.

No single unanimous opinion, no consensus or *pensée unique* is expected from this seminar, but dialogue and attention.

A. Modoux: A New Strategy for Independent and Pluralistic Media ...

I take this opportunity to thank the Croatian Government, especially the Vice-Prime Minister, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and all the journalists who represent the Croatian media community for your willingness to come together, to discuss and concretely contribute to the development of a new democratic media landscape in your country.

Finally, our thanks go to the Director of the Institute for International Relations and to the Head of the Culture and Communication Department, Mrs. Peruško Čulek, who provided UNESCO with a decisive assistance in conducting this important seminar.