Meeting on support to independent media from Russia and Belarus

Scene setter
You will open the meeting organised by the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on the topic of what tech companies can do to support independent media from Russia and Belarus.
Vice Minister Brusbārdis is replacing Minister Kariņš as the host. You will have the floor for 7 minutes after his welcome statement and you can then leave the meeting.
The meeting will gather participants from public authorities, from big tech, and from civil society and journalists. Issues discussed can be particularly sensitive for the safety of journalists and therefore there is no public communication on the meeting.
Some of the concerns and recommendations of civil society are known, as published in an open letter: [RSF and independent Russian journalists call on Big Tech to create “Engineers against Dictatorship” to prevent Russia’s online informational shutdown | RSF](https://rsf.org/en/news/2023/05/23/rsf-and-independent-russian-journalists-call-on-big-tech-to-create-engineers-against-dictatorship-prevent-russia’s-online-informational-shutdown)
Participants will discuss those recommendations as well as further ideas gathered by the Free Media Hub EAST.

Suggested opening remarks

- Vice Minister,
- First I would like to thank you and your team for hosting us and having been very active to host independent media in exile and try to address their challenges.
- Ladies and gentlemen,
- I am happy to see you all in this room, because we need to work together.
- I have met many of you already, and I know I repeat myself but some things are worth repeating: I would like to pay tribute to journalists who are working under terrible pressure and security threats to inform people in Russia and Belarus. You are at risk, your family is at risk. You are making great sacrifice for the truth, for democracy. Your work is extremely important for all of us, and I want to repeat that. Without you, there would only the propaganda of the regimes, there would be no hope.
- I also thank civil society organisations and public authorities who help journalists.
• And to the tech companies here today: I trust you will do your best to help too. I want you to be creative. You are representatives of the biggest tech companies in the world, with great engineers. You have great power, and great responsibility to be on the right side of history.

• Talking about history: I lived under Soviet occupation. I lived in a regime where there was only propaganda, only one official voice. No information, because authoritarian regimes fear informed people. The regime did not tell us anything about Chernobyl disaster. I was playing outside with my son when it happened.

• With my parents, we were listening in secret to Voice of America. It was the voice of hope, of democracy.

• Today I also want us to give information and hope to people from Russia and Belarus, we should not give up on them.

• I think, for example, about all the brave people who showed up for the funeral of Alexei Navalny.

• We need to support those who still believe in democracy, despite being fed by propaganda every day.

• It is urgent because in Belarus, the space is almost totally closed already. In Russia, the regime is getting more and more radical every day.

• **So what can be done?**

• The EU supports journalists from Russia and Belarus in exile. I met many of them in several cities across the EU last year.

• One of the clear messages: independent media need cooperation with tech companies, they need their support – and I promised to facilitate this cooperation as much as I can.

• We have a project at EU level, led by Prague Civil Society Centre, which provides grants, administrative assistance and support to media in exile based in the EU.
• And their task is also to work on recommendations to tech companies and you will all discuss them.

• The situation is complex, but one thing is clear: independent media based in the EU are under the protection of the EU. They have to comply with rules of their host countries and of the EU, and they also benefit from them. There is the Digital Services Act, soon the Media Freedom Act. Independent media based in the EU also reach people who are equally in exile in the EU.

• All the problems you will discuss today won’t go away until we solve them and I will continue being vocal about them.

• I plan to go to the West Coast of the US, where many tech companies are based, at the end of May, and I will want to hear about their action.

• I know that many issues we discuss today are very sensitive and we have to be cautious about our communication.

• Another essential point that I would like to make is the following: supporting independent media is not only crucial for the sake of democracy and the beauty of our ideals. This is about our security. The propaganda in Russia and Belarus justifies the war against Ukraine, bashes NATO, the EU and the US, tell people that we are enemies, that we are the evil, that we are monsters. What is the expected outcome of such hatred? What will happen if we remain passive?

• There is a war next door, so let’s act before it gets here.

• Thank you.