

"The word has more power than the most precise modern weapon"  
— Mikhail Shvydkoy, Russia's Minister of Culture. April 2003

Media, academic, political, military and other representatives from nearly 40 countries in Asia, Europe, the Middle East and North America gathered in Almaty, Kazakhstan, for the Second Eurasian Media Forum (EAMF) on April 24-26, 2003.

The conference took place as US-led forces were toppling Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. This injected fresh passions into contentious issues such as conflict reporting, press freedoms, bridging the Islam-West divide, corruption and even a possible repeat of the "Great Game" of the 19th Century, this time involving the hydrocarbon-rich Caspian Sea.

At the end of the conference, the Organising Committee said the Third Eurasian Media Forum would be held in Almaty in 2004.

It was agreed at the first conference, in April 2002, that the media had a pivotal role in helping to build understanding in a world desperately seeking to adjust to the potentially devastating global challenges, mainly under the banner of "War on Terrorism" and triggered by attacks on New York and Washington the previous year.

The second EAMF gathering in Kazakhstan - through which passed the once great Silk Road linking Orient and Occident - was dominated by strong passions and often deeply entrenched positions. But this was laced with tantalising glimpses of potential material for a road map to a better future. Apart from the conflict in Iraq and other international challenges, the conference was held against a backdrop of international concerns over a series of incidents involving opposition or independent journalists in the former Soviet republics, including the conviction in Kazakhstan of Sergei Duvanov on a charge of raping a minor.

A major challenge following the 2003 meeting, which showed that much remained to be done if post-Cold War freedoms could be translated into a truly free press, will be at least part implementation of some lofty ideals.

Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev told the Forum in a welcoming address: "Relations of society and mass media cannot be considered apart from the historic and geo-political context. Some peculiarities of our life are sometimes not understandable for people in the West, who got used to simple and fundamental terms like private property, freedom of speech and open society."

In a message to the Forum, Koichiro Matsuura, director-general of UNESCO, said: "Where fear, hatred or prejudice prevail, dialogue is unlikely to be free or genuine. For those committed to making dialogue work, it is vital that earnest efforts are made to listen and to understand."

Almaty, then Alma Ata, was the scene in October 1992 of an UNESCO conference on the media and pluralism. It concluded with an agenda for change that inspired hope for quick progress towards a new era of journalistic freedom, mainly in former Soviet states.

Also in a message to the conference, Jordan's Prince El Hassan bin Talal, said: "To be credible, any democratic outfit has to show that it can freely accommodate views that are out of line with the political mainstream."

Peter Preston, chairman of the British Executive of the Vienna-based International Press Institute, told the Forum: "You don't have freedom, progress or democracy unless these three things are bound together." Dariga Nazarbayeva, who heads the EAMF Organising Committee and is chairperson of the Board of Directors of Kazakhstan's Khabar Broadcasting Agency, opened the 2003 meeting with a forceful call for independent mass media.

"Mass media today should be independent and able to provide a community a chance to understand itself. Therefore, nobody has the right to use it as an instrument of manipulation and propaganda," Dr Nazarbayeva, also the Kazakh president's daughter, said in a welcoming address.

An array of prominent people took active part in the conference. They included Dr Nazarbayeva, chairperson of Khabar News Agency and the driving force behind the Eurasia Media Forum; Mikhail Shvydkoy, Russian Culture Minister; Riz Khan, former CNN International anchorman; Henrikas Louchkiavitchious, Advisor to UNESCO's Director General; Jean Fournet, NATO Assistant Secretary General (Public Diplomacy); Richard Quest, CNN Senior Business Editor (Europe); Mikhail Kozhokin, Editor-in-Chief of Russia's "Izvestia" newspaper; Peter Preston, Chairman of the British Executive of the Vienna-based International Press Institute; John Mroz, President of the U.S.-based East-West Institute; Javed Jabber, Senior Vice-President Pakistan's Millat Party and former cabinet minister; Aymeri de Montesquiou, Senator at the Parliament of France, Colonel Christopher Langton, Head of Defence Analysis at the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS); Akram Khouzam, Moscow Bureau Chief Al-Jazeera Television; Nigel Parsons, Sales Director APTN Television.

The conference was organised with the support of Khabar News Agency of Kazakhstan; the Eurasia House; the Eurasia Centre at The Judge Institute of Management Studies, University of Cambridge (UK); CNN; BBC; International Press Institute; International Journalist Unions Confederation; Associated Press Television News; the Information Telegraph Agency of Russia (ITAR-TASS); East-West Institute (USA); the International Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (IATAS); Journalist Unions of Russia and Kazakhstan; Kazakhstan TV and Radio Broadcasters' Association.

The Forum's stated aims are to promote development of the concept of Eurasia, to promote the development of its mass media, to help a professional exchange of views on fresh challenges faced by the media and to build a continuing dialogue between East and West.