Speech by Sergiy Tomilenko

President, National Union of Journalists of Ukraine
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Dear colleagues, dear Mika, dear Knud, dear friends,

Thank you for inviting me to Wiesbaden. It is good to see so many familiar faces here. And thank you to Knud Zilian and the Hessian Journalists' Association for hosting this year's Congress.

I have come from Kyiv, where life has become particularly difficult in recent weeks. I want to thank the German Journalists' Association for the friendship and support you have given Ukrainian journalists over so many years.

I especially value our friendship and direct cooperation with the Bavarian Journalists' Association.

I am very glad that Andrea Roth has joined the new International Advisory Council of our Journalists' Solidarity Centers. Andrea, I am really looking forward to working with you.

In Kyiv, things have become much harder recently. Since the summer, the city has faced increasingly intense Russian attacks. Just over a week ago, Russian strikes badly damaged our energy infrastructure. In our office in central Kyiv, and in my own apartment, we sometimes have electricity for only two or three hours at a time, twice a day.

At the office, portable power stations help us keep our computers and internet working. It is exhausting, and we know the coming winter may be even harder.

Our Journalists' Solidarity Centers help colleagues with emergency assistance, protective equipment, training and places to work when their own newsrooms have no electricity. German journalists have supported this work, and I am grateful for that.

Mika, thank you for coming to Kyiv this summer. You met our war correspondents, local editors and journalists who had survived Russian captivity. I appreciated the opportunity to introduce you to these colleagues and show you what they are facing.

One of the biggest dangers today comes from Russian drones. A visible PRESS marking can make a journalist easier for a drone operator to identify and target. We are trying to provide our colleagues with drone detectors and appropriate safety training.

What happened to Swedish writer and journalist Mustafa Can in Sloviansk two months ago shows how real this danger is. A Russian drone set his car on fire. "I was lucky—I had two minutes…," he told me.

We continue working for the release of Ukrainian journalists illegally imprisoned by Russia. According to NUJU, at least 29 Ukrainian civilian journalists are in Russian captivity. One especially outrageous case is that of Iryna Levchenko, a NUJU member and well-known journalist, whom Russian authorities sentenced to 15 years in prison. Iryna is 65.

I hope DJV will continue helping us keep their names and stories in the public eye.

One of the things that worries me most is what will happen to our local newspapers.

Many readers are elderly, and some have no reliable internet connection. For them, the printed newspaper remains important.

Together with our international partners, we support editorial teams working close to the Russian border or the front line through our Frontline Press programme.

This summer, I made a solidarity visit to frontline Sumy region. I travelled along the dangerous route that Oleksiy Pasiuha and his wife take every week, under the threat of drones.

Just before I left Kyiv for Wiesbaden, I received a message from Iryna Voronkina, a journalist from the Kharkiv region whose newspaper is part of this programme.

Iryna told me and my colleagues that her newsroom has been working without the regular postal distribution system for two years. They have started collecting subscriptions for next year, and readers are coming directly to the editorial office to pay.

An annual subscription costs 500 hryvnias, roughly ten euros. Even that is too much for some readers.

But the newsroom is afraid to spend this money. The war is so unpredictable that they cannot be sure they will be able to publish throughout the coming year, and they fear they may have to return the subscription payments.

At the very end of her message, after describing all her own difficulties, she wrote:

“Things are really hard in Kyiv now. By the way, maybe you need some help?”

Here is a colleague working close to the Russian border, unsure whether her newspaper will survive another year, asking whether she can help us in Kyiv.

Iryna also wrote:

“Well, as long as we are alive, we will keep working.”

We have felt the same care from our German colleagues, many of whom are here today.

Mika, I have brought something for you from Ukraine.

(Show the Frontline Press sign.)

This is a Frontline Press sign. It comes from our work with newspapers like Iryna’s.

In July, I gave one to Harald Stocker and our Bavarian friends in Munich. Today, I would like to give this one to you and the German Journalists’ Association.

You met some of these journalists when you visited Kyiv. I hope you will keep this sign in your office as a reminder of them.

Thank you very much.