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To:

Zagreb, October 1st 2018

CROATIAN PARLIAMENT

GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

MINISTRY OF CULTURE

EUROPEAN FEDERATION OF JOURNALISTS

INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF JOURNALISTS

ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND CO-OPERATION IN EUROPE

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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EMBASSY OF SWITZERLAND IN CROATIA

EMBASSY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

OPEN LETTER – CJA'S APPEAL FOR FREEDOM OF JOURNALISM

We kindly ask you to publicly intercede and thus show support to Hrvoje Zovko, now former editor-in-chief of HTV4, one of the news channels of the Croatian Radiotelevision (HRT), and the current President of the Croatian Journalists' Association (CJA/HND), and to stop the intimidation, censorship and arbitrariness which the HRT Board carries out in this public company, directly destroying professional journalism.

Colleague Zovko has been dismissed for pointing out censorship and the inability to carry out his work responsibly and professionally. Rather than taking into serious consideration the content of Zovko's resignation as editor-in-chief, in which he warned of censorship, HRT's leadership went into retaliation directed at CJA,

whose branch present on HRT had previously repeatedly pointed to irregularities and violations of professional journalistic standards.

Resigning, Hrvoje Zovko verbally clashed with his superior, Katarina Periša Čakarun, HRT's Information Media Service manager. The public television service used the conflict with Zovko's superior to impose an unjustifiably severe measure of extraordinary dismissal, deciding to completely ignore his right to express the opposite opinion. This is a practice inherent in authoritarian regimes, which democratic societies cannot and should not tolerate.

The CJA president tried to fight for maintaining professional standards of journalism in his own workplace and was "rewarded" by sanction for verbal delict.

Colleague Zovko has been on public television for 21 years, during which he has never received an oral or written admonishment about his work. He was informed of the dismissal through the media, and before he was handed a written document stating that his employment was terminated, his official email address was already cancelled.

Immediately upon receiving the information on the President's outstanding dismissal, CJA filed an official request to the Information, Informatization and Media Committee of the Croatian Parliament, to put the case on the agenda of their session and to enable the representatives of the CJA's Executive Committee to attend the session and further explain the situation. Most of the members of the Committee of the Parliament rejected the debate on intimidation of journalists on HRT and systematic destruction of public media services, putting it down to an issue of "working dispute" in which they "do not want to interfere". Amongst the external members of this Committee, who are elected from the ranks of members of the journalist profession, after a long time, there are no representatives of the journalist professionals, due to the will of the ruling party and the opposition. In this way the voice of our profession is silenced even in this body.

As an additional paradox, the findings in the report of the former, abruptly dismissed HRT Supervisory Board from 2016, which warn of numerous irregularities and possible illegalities in the work and operations of the Management Board, were declared a "business secret" at the request of that same Management Board. The parliamentary majority refuses to lift the "business secret" seal on this document, despite the fact that HRT is financed by Croatian citizens' money and that these same citizens have a right to know if the business decisions of the Administration are in accordance with the laws.

The public is increasingly posing the question whether public television, as it currently stands, makes sense. If something does not change very quickly, under such circumstances, its existence will become absurd. Will the legislator, the institutions in charge, and in particular, the Ministry of Culture, continue to passively observe how the existence of HRT, whose task is to inform and educate, becomes irrelevant? If HRT in such form becomes an obstacle, instead of presenting an open path towards a free society, those who set the legal framework and are responsible for their functioning, will have to finally answer the question related to their ability to cope with the existence of public media, as a sign of serious democratic achievement.

We strongly consider that due to the circumstances of the dismissal of the CJA President and the alarming situation at HRT, an urgent public response is an utmost requirement, to prevent the evident collapse of the journalist profession and in this, we ask for your help.

On behalf of Croatian Journalists' Association,
Slavica Lukić, vice president
Denis Romac, vice president

