

# Europe Press Freedom Report

2024: Confronting Political Pressure, Disinformation,  
and the Erosion of Media Independence



Annual assessment  
of press freedom in Europe  
by the partner organisations  
of the Safety of Journalists Platform

March  
2025

safety of  
journalists  
platform



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**March 2025**

Council of Europe

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*The association Cartooning for Peace was created in 2006 at the initiative of Kofi Annan, Nobel Peace Prize holder and former Secretary General of the United Nations, and press cartoonist Plantu. Now chaired by the French press cartoonist Kak, Cartooning for Peace is an international network of cartoonists committed to the promotion of freedom of expression, human rights and mutual respect among people upholding different cultures and beliefs, using the universal language of press cartoons.*

## Partner Organisations of the Platform to Promote the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists

	<b>EUROPEAN FEDERATION OF JOURNALISTS</b> <a href="http://europeanjournalists.org">http://europeanjournalists.org</a>
	<b>INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF JOURNALISTS</b> <a href="http://www.ifj.org">http://www.ifj.org</a>
	<b>ASSOCIATION OF EUROPEAN JOURNALISTS</b> <a href="http://www.aej.org">http://www.aej.org</a>
	<b>ARTICLE 19</b> <a href="http://www.article19.org">http://www.article19.org</a>
	<b>REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS</b> <a href="https://rsf.org">https://rsf.org</a>
	<b>THE COMMITTEE TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS</b> <a href="https://cpj.org">https://cpj.org</a>
	<b>INDEX ON CENSORSHIP</b> <a href="https://www.indexoncensorship.org">https://www.indexoncensorship.org</a>
	<b>INTERNATIONAL PRESS INSTITUTE</b> <a href="http://ipi.media/">http://ipi.media/</a>
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	<b>THE RORY PECK TRUST</b> <a href="https://rorypecktrust.org">https://rorypecktrust.org</a>
	<b>THE EUROPEAN BROADCASTING UNION</b> <a href="https://www.ebu.ch">https://www.ebu.ch</a>
	<b>PEN INTERNATIONAL</b> <a href="http://www.pen-international.org">http://www.pen-international.org</a>
	<b>EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR PRESS &amp; MEDIA FREEDOM</b> <a href="http://www.ecpmf.eu">www.ecpmf.eu</a>
	<b>FREE PRESS UNLIMITED</b> <a href="http://www.freepressunlimited.org">www.freepressunlimited.org</a>
	<b>JUSTICE FOR JOURNALISTS FOUNDATION</b> <a href="https://jfj.fund">https://jfj.fund</a>



## In memory of Christophe Deloire



© RSF / Manon Levet

Christophe Deloire, who died suddenly on 8 June 2024 at the age of 53, had been Secretary General of Reporters Without Borders (RSF) since 2012. Founding president of the Forum on Information and Democracy in 2018 and appointed delegate-general of France's États généraux de l'information in 2023, Christophe Deloire was a tireless advocate for free, independent, plural and diverse media.

Journalism was his lifelong struggle, and he fought to defend it with unwavering conviction.



# CONTENTS

<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>OVERVIEW OF MEDIA FREEDOM IN EUROPE IN 2024</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>THE PLATFORM AT 10</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>GOOD PRACTICES: LEADING BY EXAMPLE</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>THREATS, VIOLENCE, AND HARASSMENT AGAINST JOURNALISTS</b>	<b>28</b>
Melita Vrsaljko: 'I had no choice but to fight back'	30
Denigration and cybersquatting attacks on Reporters Without Borders	31
<b>COUNTERING SLAPPS: ADVANCING LEGAL PROTECTIONS FOR JOURNALISTS IN EUROPE</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>IMPUNITY: JUSTICE DELAYED IS JUSTICE DENIED</b>	<b>34</b>
Cases on the Platform concerning impunity for the murder of journalists	36
Vladyslav Yesypenko must be released	37
Journalists and other media actors in detention in Europe	38
By invitation. Kak: 'Are we still Charlie?'	40
<b>LEGISLATION AS A WEAPON: STIFLING JOURNALISTIC FREEDOM</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA: THE BATTLE FOR INDEPENDENCE</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>MEDIA CAPTURE: A STRATEGY TO EXCLUDE CRITICAL VOICES</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>BEYOND BORDERS: COMBATTING TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION OF JOURNALISTS</b>	<b>47</b>
Julian Assange, a precedent for press freedom at risk	49
<b>JOURNALISM UNDER SIEGE IN TIMES OF WAR</b>	<b>50</b>
Viktoria Roshchyna, a life dedicated to journalism	52
<b>SPYWARE AND SURVEILLANCE: ESCALATING THREATS TO JOURNALISM</b>	<b>53</b>
Barry McCaffrey and Trevor Birney: exposing collusion amidst state surveillance	54
<b>PROTECTING JOURNALISM: INDEPENDENCE, FAIR CONDITIONS AND LABOUR RIGHTS</b>	<b>56</b>
Deep fake, real threats: the ordeal of Dinko Gruhonjić	59
<b>COUNTRIES IN FOCUS</b>	<b>60</b>
Georgia: rapid decline of press freedom in 2024	59
Italy: political meddling and legal threats to journalism	61
Slovakia: media freedom under fire	62
<b>INSTITUTIONAL SECTIONS</b>	<b>65</b>
Council of Europe: strengthening engagement at the national level	65
European Union: implementing press freedom reforms	66





# Recommendations

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**B**y addressing critical issues such as intimidation, disinformation, and surveillance, as well as demonstrating real commitment to the defence of public interest reporting, the Council of Europe, the European Union, and their member states can bring about a safer and more favourable environment for journalism, reinforcing press freedom and democracy.

## To the Council of Europe

- ▶ Promote effective implementation of the anti-SLAPP Recommendation, aligning domestic laws in member states with its provisions and raising awareness among legislators and legal professionals, including judges and prosecutors.
- ▶ Encourage swift and full responses to alerts on the Safety of Journalists Platform and effective remedial actions by states against abuses of press freedom; prioritise resolution of cases involving impunity.
- ▶ Mobilise political support for the 'Journalists Matter' campaign to advance policies and laws that protect journalists and uphold media independence.
- ▶ Ensure that states fulfil their commitments to safeguards in existing Council of Europe recommendations for the independence and adequate funding of public broadcasters, enabling them to fulfil their mission of informing the public and providing an open forum for debate without political interference.
- ▶ Increase pressure on member states to protect journalists from abusive surveillance, align national legal frameworks and procedures with all relevant international standards, including ECtHR case law, to guarantee judicial independence and effective oversight.

## To the European Commission

- ▶ Support transposition of the anti-SLAPP Directive into national laws, and plan and implement measures as proposed in the anti-SLAPP Recommendation, to provide strong protections for journalists.
- ▶ Investigate member states violating the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) and initiate infringement proceedings where necessary.
- ▶ Hold very large online platforms (VLOPs) legally responsible for putting in place effective measures to protect journalists' rights, including redress for arbitrary content removal decisions as well as effective measures to deal with online harassment of journalists, in line with the Digital Services Act.
- ▶ Make better use of the EU's Rule of Law Report including by making its recommendations to member states more specific and actionable regarding press freedom and the protection of journalists. Expand the report's assessment to include a thorough evaluation of member states' actions to improve journalist safety, relevant measures to address SLAPPs including the transposition of the Anti-SLAPP Directive, and the implementation of EMFA. Use the report as a tool to foster trust and stimulate debate among journalistic communities at the member state level, focusing on its potential to drive positive change.
- ▶ Review the Safety of Journalists Recommendation to strengthen member states' efforts to improve the safety of journalists online and offline.
- ▶ Prioritise action in support of EU media and information literacy, media pluralism, independent journalism and fact-checking networks, and ensure they are at the heart of the EU's initiatives to combat disinformation, including the European Democracy Shield which must also be fully consistent with international human rights standards.

### **To Council of Europe member states**

- ▶ Develop and implement National Action Plans for journalists' safety; establish rapid response mechanisms against threats.
- ▶ Establish specialised units within law enforcement and judiciary to prioritise cases involving attacks on journalists.
- ▶ Align national defamation laws with the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, remove increased protection against defamation for public figures, end excessive penalties and custodial sentences for journalists, and make civil legal aid available to defendants.
- ▶ Ensure robust legal protections for public service media, guaranteeing their editorial independence and stable funding, shielded from political influence and interference, to enable them to serve the public interest effectively and impartially.
- ▶ Counter online harassment by appropriate mechanisms and practical measures and support digital safety training for journalists.
- ▶ Strengthen protections for journalists in exile, including safeguards against the misuse of Interpol 'red notices' and expedite 'safe refuge' and asylum processes.

# Executive summary

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**T**he war in Ukraine remained the most pressing concern in 2024, as Ukrainian and international journalists risked their lives daily on the front lines. Media professionals, like other civilians across the country, endured the constant threat of Russian bombardments. The essential role of the media in covering conflicts was further challenged by press freedom violations amid the ongoing crisis in Gaza, the West Bank, and the wider Middle East.

■ The results of numerous elections in Council of Europe member states, at the European level, and in the United States revealed a growing influence of illiberal and populist parties. These parties, often hostile to critical and public interest journalism, displayed this through derogatory rhetoric, legal constraints on media, and regulatory interference that undermined public service broadcasters.

■ Within Europe, this report documents extensive abuses, highlighting the urgent need for wide-ranging legislative and practical reforms.

■ *SLAPPs and legal challenges*: 2024 saw positive developments, such as the adoption of the Council of Europe's *Recommendation on countering Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation* (SLAPPs); the European Union's enactment of the *European Media Freedom Act* (EMFA); and the adoption of the EU anti-SLAPP Directive. These measures have fostered a more favourable environment for protecting press freedom and ensuring journalists' safety, however, implementation at the national level remains inconsistent and, in many cases, has yet to commence.

■ *Surveillance and source confidentiality*: spyware poses a growing threat to journalists' safety and source confidentiality. Surveillance remains pervasive and difficult to detect.

■ In addition to domestic pressures, the threat of *transnational repression* has grown, with exiled journalists increasingly facing surveillance, harassment, and intimidation from their home countries. The Platform documented several cases where journalists in exile were targeted through digital surveillance, threats to family members, and legal action designed to force their silence.

■ Some governments increasingly target exiled journalists through *misuse of international legal instruments* like Interpol 'red notices', undermining press freedom globally. The Platform partners have called for urgent reforms to address these abuses and ensure that host countries provide adequate protections, including expedited asylum processes and enhanced security measures for at-risk journalists. Efforts to combat transnational repression also gained traction, with increasing recognition of the need for international mechanisms to protect exiled journalists.

■ *Media capture*: State and political parties' control over media - through regulatory interference, ownership manipulation, and financial pressure- remains a widespread concern, undermining press freedom and pluralism. To counter this growing threat, urgent measures are needed, including greater transparency in media ownership, stronger legal safeguards to prevent undue influence, and independent regulatory bodies to uphold editorial integrity and ensure a diverse media landscape.

■ *Public service media* remained a battleground for independence as some governments continued to exploit regulatory and financial levers to exert control. From underfunding initiatives to outright interference in editorial independence, these tactics have weakened public trust in media institutions. The European Media Freedom Act offers hope for reversing this trend, but effective implementation by member states will be critical in ensuring the sustainability of pluralistic and independent media ecosystems.

■ Technological advancements, particularly in artificial intelligence, have introduced new risks to press freedom. AI-generated disinformation campaigns, deepfake videos, and automated harassment are increasingly being used to discredit journalists and erode public trust in media.

■ 2024 highlighted the first documented cases of *AI-generated disinformation campaigns* targeting journalists directly. As these technologies become more sophisticated and easily accessible, the role of journalism in combating disinformation and verifying facts becomes even more crucial. Policymakers will have to include AI governance in broader media protection strategies.

■ In response to all these challenges, press freedom groups and journalists' organisations have intensified their campaigns to safeguard journalism and democratic values. They call on member states of the Council of Europe to uphold their commitments and adhere to international agreements, including the European Convention on Human Rights, and to implement reforms that guarantee media independence and pluralism.

■ While 2024 highlighted pressing challenges to press freedom, it also demonstrated resilience and collective action. Advocacy efforts, legal reforms, and international cooperation offer hope for sustaining independent journalism. As the Safety of Journalists Platform marks its 10th anniversary, it underscores the importance of coordinated action to protect media freedom.

# Overview of media freedom in Europe in 2024

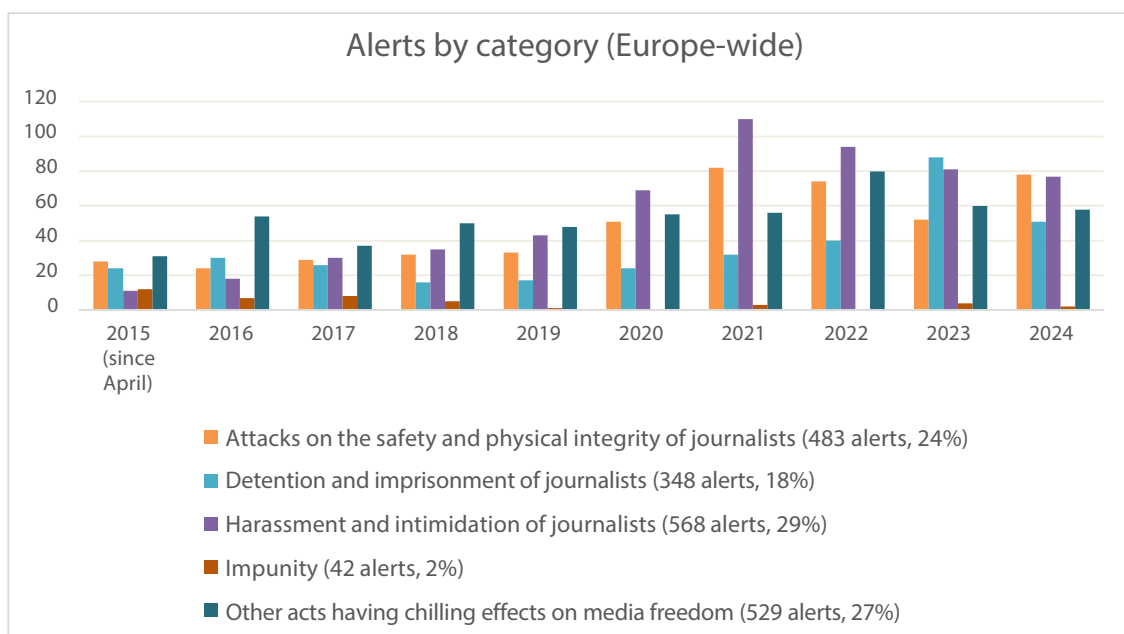
In 2024, the Safety of Journalists Platform recorded 266 alerts, consistent with the previous year but significantly above pre-COVID levels.<sup>1</sup> These alerts spanned physical attacks, intimidation, detention, impunity, and other restrictive actions. In 2024, the Platform introduced a new category: systemic obstacles to media freedom. The first set of systemic alerts was issued in September regarding defamation laws and practices.<sup>2</sup>

Georgia experienced the sharpest rise in alerts in 2024 - more than threefold compared to the previous year - largely due to attacks on journalists during pro-EU protests. The countries with the highest number of alerts on the Platform were Ukraine (40), where most violations occurred in Russian-occupied territories or were attributed to Russian forces; Russia (32), followed by Türkiye (28), Serbia (20) and Georgia (18).

*Georgia experienced the sharpest rise in alerts in 2024, more than threefold compared to the previous year.*

2024 had been heralded as a Super-Year of Elections, with voters heading to the polls for the European Parliament as well as numerous national and local elections. Populist and far-right parties now represent around a quarter of the seats in the European Parliament. In several Council of Europe member states, these parties secured a significant share of votes in national and regional elections or joined government coalitions.

These electoral gains by parties known for their illiberal ideologies - and their accompanying hostility toward the press - pose a significant threat to the coalitions that have traditionally championed media freedom and pluralism within the European Union and the Council of Europe. This shift could affect how EU member states implement the provisions of the EMFA and weaken the commitment of Council of Europe (CoE) member states to the 'Journalists Matter' campaign.



1. The 15 partner organisations of the Platform have jointly written this report. Each partner organisation reserves the right to make its own assessment of any issue or case. The data presented here reflects the alerts submitted by the partner organisations, each of which remains responsible for the accuracy and completeness of the information transmitted.
2. Safety of journalists Platform, 'Systemic alerts regarding defamation', <https://fom.coe.int/en/pagesspeciales/detail/93#defamation>

## War, a dark cloud over independent journalism

■ In 2024, war continued to cast a heavy shadow over journalism. In Ukraine, intense battles on the frontlines and extensive shelling of cities and infrastructure by Russian forces remained the most urgent concern in Europe in terms of risks and human costs. The Platform documented at least seven incidents in which journalists came under fire, including the tragic death of Reuters safety adviser Ryan Evans in late August in a missile strike in eastern Ukraine. Several other cases involved journalists being injured and media offices targeted.

# CENSURE EN RUSSIE



DEBUHME

Debuhme (Switzerland) / Cartooning for Peace

■ In Ukraine's occupied territories, Russia's treatment of journalists consistently violated the laws of war and UN Security Council resolutions that guarantee the protection of journalists as civilians in areas of armed conflict. At least 28 Ukrainian journalists were imprisoned, while others were barred from carrying out their work, forced to flee, or continued to operate undercover at great personal risk. The case of Viktoria Roshchyna is particularly emblematic. A courageous freelance journalist, she disappeared in August 2023 while reporting from within the occupied territories. In September 2024, Russian authorities announced that she had died during a transfer from a local prison to Moscow.

■ In Russia, wartime censorship and draconian laws criminalising criticism of state authorities intensified the suppression of independent journalism. By December 2024, at least 29 Russian journalists were imprisoned.<sup>3</sup> Russia was also the subject of a systemic alert from the Platform over its extensive use of defamation, insult, and disinformation laws. Several journalists were convicted in absentia, and legislation targeting so-called "foreign agents" was tightened further.

3. This figure does not include journalists arrested by Russia in the occupied territories of Ukraine.

■ Russian authorities exert considerable pressure on major foreign tech companies, compelling them to remove content and block access to tools that circumvent censorship.<sup>4</sup> The banning of foreign news outlets further deepened Russia's isolation from global information networks, leaving the public increasingly dependent on state-controlled propaganda.

■ Russia also extended its efforts to silence dissent beyond its borders. Criminal proceedings were initiated against exiled Russian journalists, foreign media organisations were added to the register of "undesirable organisations," and foreign journalists were placed on wanted lists—particularly in connection with alleged illegal border crossings following a Ukrainian military incursion into the Kursk region.

■ The Gaza war also significantly affected journalism and press freedom, as the conflict reverberated across European streets and newsrooms, triggering intense and polarised reactions. The Platform documented numerous cases of harassment and threats against journalists covering the crisis, with incidents reported in Sweden,<sup>5</sup> Denmark,<sup>6</sup> Germany,<sup>7</sup> Italy, and the UK.<sup>8</sup> Press freedom groups expressed concerns about restrictions on reporting such a major global crisis, urging Israeli authorities to allow international press access to the enclave and to ensure the safety of Palestinian journalists. Given the reporting ban, these journalists remain critical sources of information on the unfolding crisis.



*Del Rosso (Italy) / Cartooning for Peace*

4. Human Rights Watch, 'Russia: Foreign Tech Companies Cave to Authorities' Pressure', <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/17/russia-foreign-tech-companies-cave-authorities-pressure>
5. Alert 'Protest Outside Swedish Journalist Inas Hamdan's Home, Threat Against Danish Journalist Claes Kirkeby Theilgaard', <https://go.coe.int/NNd27>
6. *ibid*
7. Alert 'BILD Reporter Iman Sefati Repeatedly Threatened in Berlin', <https://go.coe.int/wR7Rf>
8. Alert 'British Police Seize Electronic Devices in Raid on Journalist Asa Winstanley's Home', <https://go.coe.int/m2c1v>



## 'Hostage diplomacy'

■ The Kremlin's escalating confrontation with NATO and the West formed the backdrop to a major prisoner exchange in August 2024. Among the 26 individuals released were two US journalists: Evan Gershkovich of the *Wall Street Journal*, charged with "espionage," and Alsu Kurmasheva of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, accused of "spreading fake news about the Russian military." Vladimir Kara-Murza, a Russian opposition figure and journalist (recipient of the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for Commentary for his *Washington Post* columns), was also included in the swap.

■ Hostage-taking has increasingly become a tool in the broader strategy of interstate relations and hybrid warfare.<sup>9</sup> Foreign nationals working in Russia are now routinely warned that they may face arbitrary arrest and blackmail, even if they adhere strictly to the red lines established by Russian authorities.

■ The exchange also included Pablo González Yaguë, also known as Pavel Rubtsov, a Spanish-Russian national detained in Poland since February 2022 on espionage charges. Following his release, Rubtsov was transported to Moscow, where he was welcomed by Vladimir Putin.<sup>10</sup> Rubtsov was suspected of collaborating with the GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency.<sup>11</sup> Two weeks after the exchange, the Polish prosecutor formally charged Rubtsov with espionage. On 16 October 2024, in light of evidence revealed after the swap, partner organisations of the Platform deleted the alert concerning Rubtsov's detention, confirming that his arrest was unrelated to journalistic activities.

## Hybrid warfare

■ 2024 also confirmed the divisive impact of disinformation on the media sphere and journalism. On the one hand, certain member states evoked disinformation to detain journalists or to steamroll legislation on fake news, further restricting press freedom. On the other hand, strategies of influence involving the weaponisation of social media were employed to manipulate or unsettle public opinion.

■ In Romania, the presidential candidate Călin Georgescu, described as a Putin-sympathising far-right conspiracy theorist, surged ahead while bypassing the press and relying on supporters active on TikTok. Georgescu's rise was so rapid and disruptive that, on 6 December, Romania's Constitutional Court annulled the first round of the election, citing substantial evidence of Russian interference in the electoral process. 'His shock victory puts the EU's Digital Services Act in the spotlight', wrote Politico Europe. 'The Commission, which oversees TikTok faces the delicate balancing act of proving that its content-moderation rulebook works'.

■ In Georgia, Russian networks and state-owned outlets were reported to be disseminating disinformation and conspiracy theories during the October elections, aiming to discredit pro-EU groups.

## The press under pressure

■ In countries not affected by war, practising journalism was far from straightforward in 2024. Physical and verbal attacks, threats, and harassment against journalists increased. Reporting on demonstrations and riots remained particularly perilous, as some protesters perceived journalists as 'enemies of the people'.

■ Journalists also faced instances of police violence. Georgia presented an especially troubling example of police brutality, as dozens of journalists experienced assaults, arrests as well as obstruction of their professional duties while covering pro-EU protests in Tbilisi.<sup>12</sup> In several countries, the situation showed modest improvement due to enhanced dialogue between the profession and law enforcement agencies.

■ Online harassment - particularly targeting women journalists - urgently needs to be addressed. It has taken extreme forms, as demonstrated by a deep fake disinformation campaign launched against Serbian journalist Stevan Dojčinović.<sup>13</sup> Public officials have also attacked the media; for instance, in Slovakia, Prime Minister Robert Fico referred to the media as 'bloodthirsty bastards'.

9. The arrest on 19 December in Iran of Italian journalist Cecilia Sala was also interpreted by some Western officials as another example of "hostage diplomacy". She was released on 8 January 2025.

10. Reporters Without Borders, Poland: the Spanish-Russian national Pablo González abused the rights democracies grant to journalists, <https://rsf.org/en/poland-spanish-russian-national-pablo-gonz%C3%A1lez-abused-rights-democracies-grant-journalists>

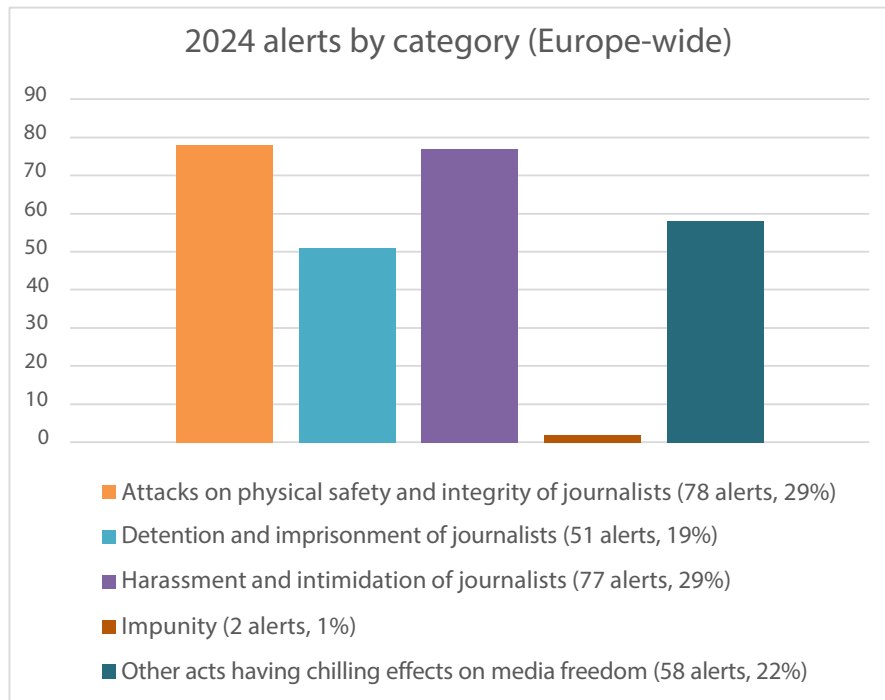
11. The Insider, 'Free Pablo and Fancy Bear: GRU illegal Pavel Rubtsov got a warm welcome home in Moscow by a hacker on the FBI Most Wanted List' <https://theinsider.ru/en/politics/276740>

12. Alert 'Police Crack Down on Journalists Covering Pro-EU Protests', <https://go.coe.int/i1oVB>

13. Alert 'Serbian Journalist Stevan Dojčinović Target of a Smear Campaign', <https://go.coe.int/t6uJm>

*Online harassment has taken extreme forms, as demonstrated by a deep fake disinformation campaign launched against Serbian journalist Stevan Dojčinović.*

■ Surveillance, a particularly egregious form of assault against independent journalism, which was exposed in 2021 by the *Forbidden Stories* investigation into the misuse of Pegasus spyware<sup>14</sup> continued to create fear and uncertainty for journalists. In May 2024, Access Now and its partners revealed how at least seven Russian, Belarusian, Latvian, and Israeli journalists and activists had been allegedly targeted with NSO Group's Pegasus spyware within the EU.<sup>15</sup>



### Detention, a tool of censorship

■ Although Julian Assange was finally released from Belmarsh prison in London, and Belarusian filmmaker Andrei Gnyot,<sup>16</sup> detained in Serbia under an Interpol 'red notice', was allowed to leave for an EU country, a significant number of journalists and media workers remain behind bars. As of 31 December 2024, 159 journalists were held in detention across Europe, including 44 in Belarus, 30 in Azerbaijan, 29 in Russia (in addition to 28 in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine), 27 in Türkiye, and 1 in Georgia.<sup>17</sup> Andrei Aliaksandrau, one of the journalists detained in Belarus, is a former colleague of *Index on Censorship* and *Article 19*, both partners of the Platform. He has now spent four years in detention on politically motivated and unfounded charges.

■ The past year also saw instances of journalists and media workers being temporarily detained in ways that hinder their work and risk discouraging others from pursuing similar investigative efforts. For example, in June, a journalist from the French independent news platform *Blast* was detained for 32 hours by police after refusing to disclose her sources.<sup>18</sup>

14. Forbidden Stories, 'Pegasus: The new global weapon for silencing journalists', <https://forbiddenstories.org/pegasus-the-new-global-weapon-for-silencing-journalists/>

15. Access Now, 'Exiled, then spied on: Civil society in Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland targeted with Pegasus spyware', <https://www.accessnow.org/publication/civil-society-in-exile-pegasus/>

16. Alert 'Belarusian Journalist Andrey Gnyot faces extradition from Serbia to Belarus', <https://go.coe.int/dmNR7>

17. Safety of Journalists Platform, 'Journalists and other media actors currently in detention in Europe', <https://fom.coe.int/en/listejournalistes/detentions>

18. Alert 'Blast Journalist Arrested while Covering Protest and Asked to Reveal Sources', <https://go.coe.int/9Ttp0>

## Restrictive legislation

■ Legislation which unduly restricts press freedom and chills free speech remains in place in a few member states, often under pretexts like combating disinformation, terrorism, defamation and hate speech, or protecting the right to privacy or 'traditional values'. In Georgia, the adoption of the '*Transparency of Foreign Influence*' and of the '*Family Values and the Protection of Minors*' laws raised serious concerns about the future of media freedom. Such legislation threatens the very existence of independent media, undermines civil society and restricts journalists' right to report freely.

## Media capture and Public Service Media

■ Governments continued to try to shape the media sector to fit their interests and marginalise critical and independent voices. Public Service Media (PSM), including broadcasting and national news agencies, were in the crosshairs, as they are expected to represent a plurality of voices and adhere to norms of independence and impartiality, in contradiction to illiberal forces' strategies to dominate the public space. PSM were also vulnerable to spending cuts or threats thereof in several member states, at the risk of undermining their capacity to assume their mission of public interest journalism.

■ In Poland, the new government took steps to dismantle the grip of the Law and Justice Party on the media sector, particularly over PSM. It launched a consultation process on the legal media framework to align it with the EMFA. However, the adoption of these reforms remains pending.

## The judicial frontline

■ Abusive legal threats and actions, including defamation lawsuits and SLAPPs, remained a major concern for the independent press. However, after years of advocacy, the partners of the Platform welcomed two advances at the European level: the adoption by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers of a Recommendation aimed at countering the abuse of SLAPPs, and the promulgation by the European Union of the anti-SLAPP Directive, covering cross-border civil cases. However political will by national governments to address the problem is now needed.

■ The Platform recorded troubling examples of alleged collusion between security agencies, the judiciary and presumed perpetrators: in Greece, the state's investigation into the unlawful surveillance of journalists actually targeted the journalists who themselves uncovered the scandal - rather than the perpetrators; in some countries, the failures to secure convictions in a number of impunity cases related to the killing of journalists bore trademarks of alleged collusion of some officials with perpetrators. In December 2024 a tribunal in London found that the Police Service of Northern Ireland, as well as the Greater London Metropolitan Police, unlawfully surveilled two journalists in Northern Ireland in order to get their sources for a story on the 1994 Loughinisland sectarian massacre and an alleged cover-up and collusion between police forces and Loyalist hitmen during the Troubles (the conflict that took place between the late 1960s and 1998).

■ The impunity of journalists' murderers and their sponsors continued to be one of the major threats to journalist safety as it is tantamount to a 'licence to kill'.

## Global threat

■ Governments are not impeded by national borders when it comes to attacking journalism. Russia has been held responsible for a disinformation campaign of unparalleled scale to destabilise the political situations in Council of Europe member states and discredit mainstream media, a tactic which increases the risk of attacks and harassment against journalists.

■ Some countries (China, Russia, Iran, Myanmar, Turkmenistan, Saudi Arabia, Rwanda and others) have resorted to transnational repression: physically attacking, harassing, putting pressure and spying on journalists in exile or weaponising Interpol's '*red notices*' (requests to law enforcement worldwide to locate and provisionally arrest a person pending extradition, surrender, or similar legal action) against critical journalists.<sup>19 20</sup>

19. Human Rights Watch, Governments Target Nationals Living Abroad, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/22/governments-target-nationals-living-abroad>

20. Reporters Without Borders, 'Watch Out Because We're Coming For You: Transnational Repression of Iranian Journalists in the UK', <https://rsf.org/en/watch-out-because-we-re-coming-you-rsf-report-unprecedented-transnational-repression-iranian>

■ European journalists' reporting was also limited by the political developments beyond the continent. 'Censorship somewhere is censorship anywhere', says Columbia University President Lee Bollinger. Access bans or restrictions, as in Gaza or Ukraine's occupied territories, were major hurdles for independent journalism, undermining the public's right to know about international events of paramount public interest.

■ Donald Trump's victory in the November 2024 elections set off alarm bells. US outlets reckon that legal threats, including crippling defamation lawsuits, media subpoenas, and pressures on whistleblower protection, are likely to increase. The *Espionage Act* which was applied to the case of Julian Assange risks being used much more actively against journalists inside and outside of the US. Acknowledging this threat, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe passed a Resolution in October calling on the US to "urgently reform the 1917 *Espionage Act* to exclude its application to publishers, journalists and whistleblowers who legitimately disclose classified information".<sup>21</sup>

*US outlets reckon that legal threats, including crippling defamation lawsuits, media subpoenas, and pressures on whistleblower protection, are likely to increase.*

■ The *rapprochement* between Big Tech's U.S. leaders, many adhering to 'free speech absolutism', and Donald Trump was also interpreted as a risk for European efforts aimed at regulating social platforms. It is expected to test the effectiveness of the European Union's Digital Services Act and Europe's efforts to fight disinformation and hate speech. The European ambition of being a global norm-setting power inspired by international human rights law is clearly under threat by what happens in the US. 'The alliance of Trump and Elon Musk is going to affect us here in Europe too: Our elections. Our security',<sup>22</sup> warned Carole Cadwalladr last November in her key-note speech at the OSCE Conference on Media Freedom in Vienna.

## European institutions

■ 2024 marked a significant milestone for press freedom in the EU as the EMFA and the anti-SLAPP directive came into force. Member states are required to apply the EMFA provisions fully by August 2025 and the directive by May 2026. A new European Commission has been in place since December 2024, with two Commissioners entrusted with a specific mandate on media policy. Press freedom groups expect them to push for effective implementation of EMFA, strengthen anti-SLAPP measures, leverage Rule of Law reports to achieve tangible improvements for journalists, and push EU member states to apply the 2021 Recommendation on the safety of journalists.

■ Much of the focus in the Council of Europe was on the '*Journalists Matter*' campaign, which seeks to enhance public officials and civil society's awareness of press freedom's essential role in democracy and to promote national initiatives that improve journalists' safety. Platform members have advocated for the reinforcement of nationally led initiatives that can be tracked and supported, in line with the Council of Europe's Journalist Safety Recommendation.

■ Press freedom groups welcomed the adoption of the Council of Europe's Recommendation on SLAPPs and the Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law. They also closely followed the Parliamentary Assembly (PACE)'s reports on propaganda and media concentration, recognising these as crucial elements of an enabling environment for free and independent media.

■ In October, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) issued a landmark decision<sup>23</sup> on Russia's foreign agents' laws. The Court found the legislation to be "stigmatising, misleading and used in an overly broad and unpredictable way", asserting that its purpose was more to punish and intimidate than to address legitimate concerns over transparency or national security. The ECtHR ruling is expected to influence other member states that have adopted or plan to adopt similar legislation.

21. Parliamentary Assembly recognises Julian Assange as a 'political prisoner' and warns against the chilling effect of his harsh treatment, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/pace-recognises-julian-assange-as-a-political-prisoner-and-warns-against-the-chilling-effect-of-his-harsh-treatment>

22. Carole Jane Cadwalladr 'There is a new kind of darkness facing the world', <https://timesofmalta.com/article/there-new-kind-darkness-facing-world.1101540>

23. See Kobaliya and Others vs Russia, application no. 39446/16 and 106 others, judgment of 22.10.2024, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-237425>

■ This report underscores that while press freedom is undoubtedly under threat, journalists and their allies in governments and intergovernmental institutions are more determined than ever to combat assaults on what is often referred to as the 'mother of all liberties'.

# The Platform at 10

In April 2025, we will commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Council of Europe's Safety of Journalists Platform. This milestone presents an opportunity to reflect on the evolution of press freedom, journalism and the state of the media across the 46 member states, as well as in Belarus and Russia,<sup>24</sup> to assess progress and chart the path forward.

1



2



Kotkot  
2024

Kotkot (Jordan) / Cartooning for Peace

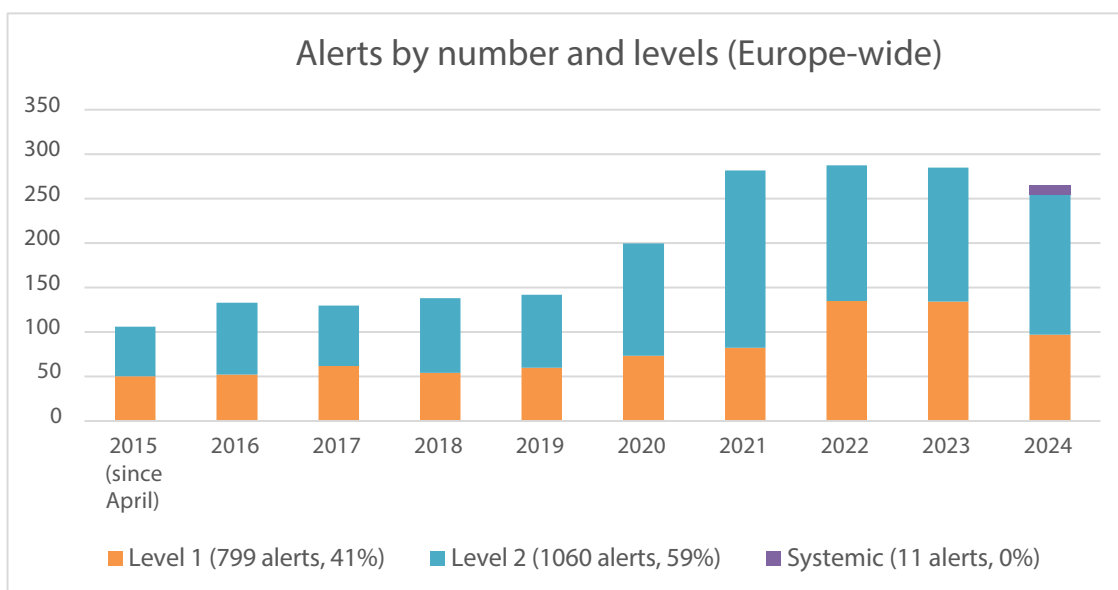
Thanks to the geographical reach of its 15 partner organisations and the diversity of their mandates, the Platform has amassed an impressive volume of data, providing a representative picture of press freedom in the region. This data has enabled the documentation of threats to journalism and the identification of emerging trends. The alerts recorded have underscored the dangers of leaving such cases unresolved, as doing so undermines the commitments that the member states pledged to respect under the European Convention on Human Rights. Since its launch in April 2015, and as of 31 December 2024, the Platform has registered nearly 2,000 media freedom alerts.

The Platform was born in the wake of the terrorist attack against the French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015, and it was quickly confronted with a number of targeted killings of journalists inside Europe. Since its inception, it has recorded 51 such cases.<sup>25</sup> Many victims, including Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta and Ján Kuciak in Slovakia, were reporting on issues of corruption and organised crime.

While some alerts on the Platform point to cases that threaten media freedom or journalists' safety in an otherwise relatively stable press freedom environment, an increasing number reflect systematised attacks on the press. These attacks do not merely stem from rogue officials, errant police officers, or inflammatory politicians; they are increasingly integral to political agendas that reject core principles of liberal democracy.

24. Russia was excluded from the Council of Europe in the aftermath of its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine and Belarus is not a member of the Council of Europe, but it is covered by the Platform partners

25. Safety of Journalists Platform, 'Journalists and other media actors killed in Europe since 2015', <https://fom.coe.int/en/listejournalistes/tues>



■ The hostility of these political movements toward independent journalism largely reflects the doctrine of ‘majoritarianism’ - the belief that electoral majorities grant governments the right to rule without checks and balances, and without respecting the right to criticism, dissent or freedom of opinion. Their aim is to redesign the media landscape to weaken or dismantle the pillars of press freedom.

■ Media capture is one of their levers. It contains a wide range of strategies, including suffocating pluralism and independence of the public service media, politicising regulatory bodies, enabling the acquisition of influential private outlets by political allies, and marginalising, defunding or delegitimising critical media. The aim is to dominate the public space and impose ideological narratives.

■ Experience has shown that these strategies are pursued ruthlessly. Press freedom seeking to expose and counteract such developments often become targets of smear campaigns by politicians, online trolls or hostile private media groups. Alarming, in one instance, Reporters without Borders (RSF) - a partner of the Platform - became the victim of identity theft and cybersquatting orchestrated by a public relations firm linked to a media group previously accused by RSF of compromising journalistic independence and pluralism.

■ This vulnerability is exacerbated by media bashing from public officials and politicians, who misuse their authority for political purposes, and by the lack of effective regulation of incitement and hate speech on social media. These factors often serve as open invitations to insult, threaten, harass and assault journalists. Disturbingly, significant segments of the public sometimes support these policies, questioning the role of journalism and press freedom, and applauding political leaders who denounce journalists as mercenaries or deride the so-called ‘lying press’.

■ The rise of populism is also intertwined with ‘culture wars’. In an increasing number of jurisdictions, laws invoking “traditional values” or labelling organisations and media outlets as “foreign agents” are being used to discredit critical media, NGOs, by framing them as unpatriotic or treasonous.

■ Ten years after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack by al-Qaeda-linked terrorists, journalists, including cartoonists, continue to face censorship driven by religious extremism. However, they are now increasingly targeted by far-right groups exploiting anti-press rhetoric propagated by populist politicians.

*Journalists are now increasingly targeted by far-right groups exploiting anti-press rhetoric propagated by populist politicians.*

### Changing media ecosystem and post-truth narratives

■ Journalists’ and press freedom organisations are increasingly concerned with trends which affect the news sphere and threaten to undermine public understanding of - and support for - independent and quality journalism. The 2024 alerts highlighted the economic and social precarity of media workers, with freelancers being



particularly vulnerable, and the danger it represents for the media's independence from commercial and political pressures. The fragile business models of the press, excessive media concentration, the emerging impact of artificial intelligence, and fundamental shifts in how people consume news and reward non-journalistic voices all challenge independent journalism and media freedom. Investigative journalists are particularly vulnerable as they expose private or public corruption and abuses.

■ The 2024 *Digital News Report* of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism confirmed a growing public disaffection towards journalism.<sup>26</sup> A significant number of Europeans avoid the news entirely, while younger generations tend to rely on non-traditional online outlets, with 'an increasing focus on partisan commentators, influencers, and young news creators, especially on YouTube and TikTok'.

■ These trends are often associated with a subversion of facts, reminiscent of George Orwell's 1984 dystopia where *war is peace and freedom is slavery*. Truth, honesty and accuracy - principles enshrined in journalism's ethical codes - are increasingly under attack by, as Giuliano da Empoli called them in his essay, the *engineers of chaos*.

■ Disinformation, conspiracy theories, rumours, insults and incitement to hatred, whether disseminated by state agents, organised groups or angry mobs, have invaded spaces once curated by media generally committed to ethical norms and the public interest. This erosion of journalism's gatekeeping role has weakened its function as a fact-checker and a trusted mediator in public discourse. Media ethics educator Ed Lambeth describes journalists as 'the stewards of free expression, helping to keep the wells of public discourse unpoisoned, if not wholly clean'. The weakening of this stewardship has made journalists increasingly vulnerable to campaigns aimed at discrediting them, paving the way for public restrictions on their ability to report 'without fear or favour' and exposing them to verbal and physical attacks.

## Under surveillance

■ In recent years, journalists have learned the importance of protecting their professional and private communications from surveillance and hacking. The use of spyware such as *Pegasus* or *Predator* to monitor journalists has been documented in several countries. Both traditional and digital-age *cloak-and-dagger* techniques have been employed by authoritarian states to surveil and threaten exiled journalists.

■ Investigative journalism on matters of public interest often relies on leaks and confidential sources. The infiltration of electronic communications jeopardises investigations into corruption, abuses of power, and serious international crimes, including violations of international humanitarian law and war crimes. Despite the European Parliament's investigation (by the Committee of Inquiry to investigate the use of *Pegasus* and equivalent surveillance spyware, or PEGA committee) and the gradual enforcement of the EMFA, this assault on press freedom remains a major - and often undetectable threat.

## Vexatious lawsuits

■ The courts have always been a critical battleground for press freedom. Issues, such as abusive defamation proceedings, have a wide-ranging impact on media freedom, leading the Platform partners to designate them as "systemic alerts". Combatting SLAPPs - vexatious legal actions intended to intimidate and silence critical journalists - has become a priority for the Platform's partners.

■ The rule of law is an essential pillar of democracy and human rights as defined by the *European Convention on Human Rights* and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights. However, law enforcement and judicial institutions often appear biased against independent journalists, especially those reporting on sensitive national security issues. In several cases, journalists have been targeted by national intelligence attempting to uncover their confidential sources in stories that portray state authorities in a negative light.

## State response and advocacy

■ Ten years after the Platform's launch, the steady stream of alerts posted by partner organisations provides a large database for identifying key threats to press freedom and the remedial actions that member states can take to uphold their obligations under the *European Convention on Human Rights*.

26. Nic Newman, Overview and key findings of the 2024 Digital News Report, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/dnr-executive-summary>

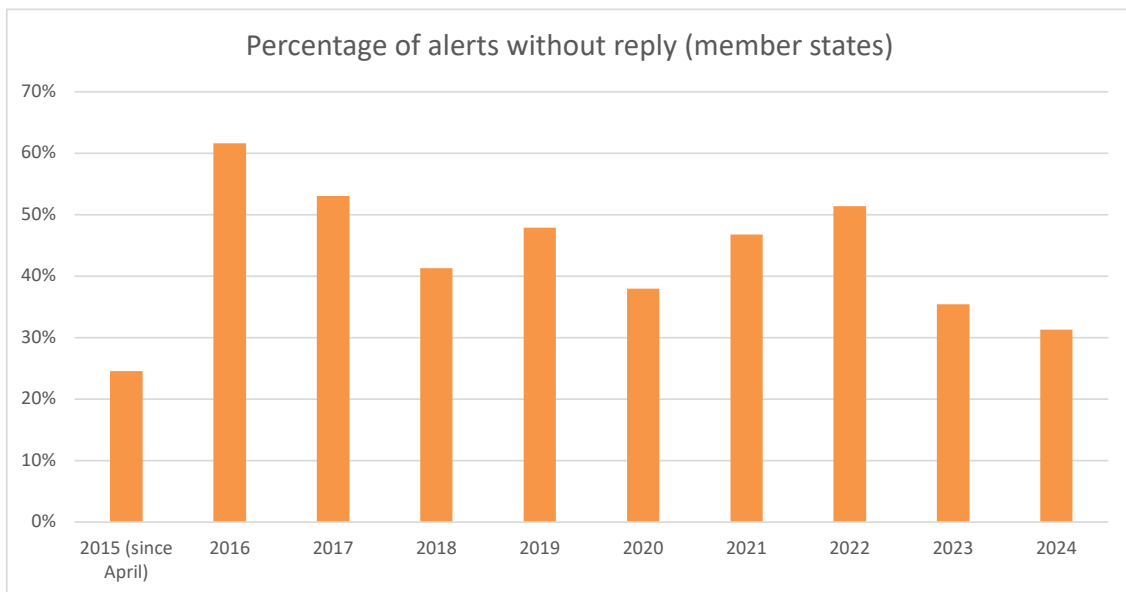


*Half of the alerts on the Platform have received a response and close to a quarter of cases have been resolved.*

■ Half of these alerts have received a response from the member state concerned, and close to a quarter of cases have been resolved. These figures should be much higher to roll back the backsliding in press freedom which triggered the launch of the Platform. However, the Platform's efforts to act as loudspeakers for press freedom have contributed to increasing awareness among member states. Alerts have bolstered the Council of Europe's *'Journalists Matter'* campaign, launched in 2023 to promote press freedom and protect journalists from violence, threats, and harassment. Several countries have introduced new legislation that classifies attacks on journalists as an aggravating factor in criminal offences and launched initiatives to improve protections, including digital safety training for journalists and educational programmes in schools highlighting the role of journalism in democracy.

■ The alerts have also spurred an increasing number of remedial actions, including dropping criminal investigations or charges against journalists, law enforcement action against those who threaten or attack journalists, and public retractions or apologies following complaints of harassment or verbal abuse from public figures.

■ Some member states have joined a *Group of Friends on the Safety of Journalists and Media Freedom* (which includes diplomatic representatives from Austria, France, Greece, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom), actively addressing the most pressing issues and supporting campaigns at intergovernmental and national levels. On 2 November 2024, marking the *International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists*, the Group recognised the Platform as *'an essential tool for the prevention and redress of serious threats and violence against journalists'*.<sup>27</sup>



27. Joint statement by the Group of Friends of the Council of Europe on the Safety of Journalists and Media Freedom, <https://go.coe.int/Xazgo>

# Good practices: leading by example

**T**he 'Journalists Matter' campaign for the safety of journalists, launched in October 2023 in Riga, aims to promote effective engagement by Council of Europe member states in support of press freedom. Platform partners welcomed the initiative, alongside other coordinated actions for press freedom and journalist safety, by entitling their previous annual report 'Time to Turn the Tide'. But is the tide now meaningfully turning?



Guffo (Mexico) / Cartooning for Peace

■ On the positive side, most member states have engaged with the campaign in some capacity. Over 20 states have established national committees to coordinate efforts domestically,<sup>28</sup> and at least 12 have adopted - or are planning to adopt - national action plans.<sup>29</sup> These plans have been in place for some time in Lithuania and the United Kingdom.<sup>30</sup> By June 2024, 39 countries had designated focal points<sup>31</sup> to act as interfaces between domestic stakeholders and the Council of Europe secretariat for the campaign.<sup>32</sup>

28. <https://rm.coe.int/info-doc-soj-national-committees-28-feb2023/1680ab0d0f>

29. *Journalists Matter*: Council of Europe Campaign for the Safety of Journalists, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/safety-of-journalists-campaign>

30. National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-action-plan-for-the-safety-of-journalists/national-action-plan-for-the-safety-of-journalists>

31. <https://rm.coe.int/soj-2023-03-list-of-national-focal-points-by-country/1680ad4fd7>

32. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/member-countries-initiatives-focal-points>

*Over 20 states have established national committees to coordinate efforts domestically, and at least 12 have adopted - or are planning to adopt - national action plans.*

■ In the Netherlands, the *PersVeilig* programme, which expedites cases involving violence or threats against journalists, has been reviewed and further developed to improve outcomes.<sup>33</sup> The country also expanded its initiative “*DichterBijNieuws*” (*Closer To The News*) initiative,<sup>34</sup> which offers workshops and journalist-led classroom sessions to educate young people about the role of journalism in democracy.

■ As part of its National Action Plan, Switzerland outlined measures to safeguard journalists, including public awareness campaigns, legal reforms for better protection, and support systems for journalists facing threats.

■ Luxembourg introduced measures that increased penalties, expanded police powers to investigate crimes, and created new offences targeting threats against journalists. The Criminal Code now includes specific provisions for attacks on journalists during public protests. Threats against journalists can result in imprisonment, with an aggravating factor applied when the victim is a journalist. Furthermore, criminal penalties were introduced in the Code for doxing – public disclosure of private information – with enhanced sentences when journalists are targeted.

■ Germany has implemented various measures over the past two years to enhance journalists’ safety, including improved police-journalist coordination and training police officers to respect press credentials during demonstrations. Additionally, the country has strengthened systems for documenting and analysing crimes against journalists, enabling authorities to identify patterns, regions of concern (such as Saxony or Berlin), and crime types prevalent in specific settings.

■ Norway increased funding for media outlets in rural areas to ensure diverse local media representation. The government also introduced measures to counteract online harassment of journalists, particularly women and minority journalists, by providing digital safety training and support systems.

■ Finland launched initiatives to address the mental health and well-being of journalists who face harassment or trauma, especially those covering conflicts or distressing topics. These initiatives include counselling services and workshops tailored to media workers.

■ Italy raised press freedom concerns in 2024 but its system - established in 2017 to protect journalists, particularly from organised crime - continued to provide examples of good practice. In March 2024, the *Coordination Centre for monitoring, analysis and information exchange on acts of intimidation against journalists*, chaired by the Minister of the Interior, published a detailed report documenting 98 specific acts of intimidation directed against journalists in 2023. Of these, 12 were attributed to organised crime and 40 to political or other social groups. Such reports allow law enforcement to better shape and target policies to reduce attacks on the press.

■ Member states have also taken effective remedial actions in response to alerts. Examples include the dropping of criminal investigations or charges against journalists,<sup>35</sup> prosecuting those who threaten or attack journalists,<sup>36</sup> and issuing public retractions or apologies following complaints of harassment or verbal abuse by public figures.<sup>37</sup>

33. Alert ‘Dutch Journalist Ton van Dijk Threatened with Death’, <https://go.coe.int/xk0K5>

34. <https://dichterbijnieuws.nl/>

35. Alert ‘Blast Journalist Arrested while Covering Protest and Asked to Reveal Sources’, <https://go.coe.int/9Ttp0>

36. Alert ‘Faktograf Journalist Melita Vrsaljko Assaulted in the Street and at her Home’, <https://go.coe.int/JuBwT>

37. Alert ‘Armenian Journalists Injured in Police Violence against Media Journalists covering Street Demonstrations’, <https://go.coe.int/z2WTM>

■ Positive measures taken by national courts include the annulment of fines imposed on journalists over riot coverage in Belgium,<sup>38</sup> the acquittal of Swiss journalists accused of defamation,<sup>39</sup> and convictions and sentencing of individuals who:

- ▶ Threatened or assaulted journalists (Montenegro);<sup>40</sup>
- ▶ Incited hatred against a journalist based on sexual orientation (Switzerland);<sup>41</sup>
- ▶ Attacked a journalist using arson (Serbia);<sup>42</sup>
- ▶ Raided the property of a TV broadcaster (Türkiye);<sup>43</sup> and
- ▶ Murdered a journalist (Netherlands).<sup>44</sup>

■ Perpetrators of police violence against journalists covering protests were also convicted and sentenced in Armenia.<sup>45</sup>

■ EU-wide initiatives contribute to these good practices, including efforts to combat disinformation through the *European Digital Media Observatory*<sup>46</sup> and the *Journalism Trust Initiative*,<sup>47</sup> the promotion of fact-checking via the *European Fact-Checking Standards Network*,<sup>48</sup> and media literacy programmes through the *Media Literacy Expert Group*.<sup>49</sup> Legislation such as the *Digital Services Act* also holds social media platforms accountable for their actions and policies.

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38. Alert 'Freelance Journalist Arrested while Covering Riots Consecutive to the World Cup France-Morocco Football Game', <https://go.coe.int/kFy2u>

39. Alert 'Satirical Paper Vigousse Faces Several Defamation Lawsuits', <https://go.coe.int/0AtrP>

40. Alert 'Threats on Montenegro Journalist Milka Tadić-Mijović', <https://go.coe.int/QaU3e>

41. Alert 'Swiss Journalist Cathy Macherel Faces Online Insults by Far-right Essayist', <https://go.coe.int/5pZG8>

42. Alert 'Investigative Journalist Milan Jovanović Attacked with Molotov Cocktail', <https://go.coe.int/0BRP6>

43. Alert 'Mob Raids Turkish TV Broadcaster Deniz Postası, Beats Journalist Azim Deniz', <https://go.coe.int/Zpebp>

44. Alert 'Crime Reporter Peter R. de Vries Shot in Amsterdam, Hospitalized in Critical Condition', <https://go.coe.int/wz5TB>

45. Alert 'Armenian Journalists Injured in Police Violence against Media Journalists covering Street Demonstrations', <https://go.coe.int/z2WTM>

46. European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/european-digital-media-observatory>

47. The Journalism Trust Initiative, <https://www.journalismtrustinitiative.org/>

48. The European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN), <https://efcsn.com/>

49. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en>

# Threats, violence, and harassment against journalists

In 2024, the Platform documented the death of Ukrainian journalist *Viktoria Roshchyna* in Russian custody. She reportedly died on 19 September while being transferred from a pre-trial detention centre to Moscow.<sup>50</sup> Roshchyna had disappeared on 3 August 2023 in Ukraine's occupied territories. The Platform also recorded the death of safety adviser *Ryan Evans*,<sup>51</sup> who was killed on 24 August in a missile strike in Kramatorsk, eastern Ukraine.

■ On 18 June, Kazakh journalist Aidos Sadykov was shot while driving in Kyiv with his wife, journalist Natalia Sadykova. The couple, refugees in Ukraine for a decade, ran *Base*, a YouTube channel exposing Kazakh government corruption. Sadykov died on 2 July after 13 days in intensive care. On 20 June, Ukrainian investigators identified two Kazakh suspects, who tracked Sadykov, and carried out the attack under orders from an 'unidentified person.'

■ Seventy-eight alerts highlighted attacks on the physical safety and integrity of journalists, compared to 52 in 2023. The highest number of cases were recorded in Ukraine, driven by Russia's war of aggression (19), followed by Georgia (8), Serbia (8) and Türkiye (8).

■ Journalists faced harassment and intimidation for their work, with 77 alerts posted in this category, the highest number of cases recorded in Russia (16).



Dubovsky (Ukraine) / Cartooning for Peace

50. Alert 'Ukrainian Journalist Viktoria Roshchyna Dies in Captivity in Russia', <https://go.coe.int/A0Mnh>

51. Alert 'Reuters Safety Adviser Ryan Evans Killed, 3 Journalists Injured in Missile Attack on Kramatorsk Hotel', <https://go.coe.int/tgG6i>

■ Aside from acts of war resulting from Russia's aggression against Ukraine, most physical attacks on journalists were related to their reporting on public protests and elections, underscoring persistent concerns about inadequate policing of public spaces.

■ In Georgia, on the night between 16 and 17 April, riot police assaulted at least four journalists who covered mass protests after Parliament passed a Bill 'On transparency of foreign influence' in its first reading.<sup>52</sup> Police obstruction – using powers to deny access, stop, question, seize, fine or detain journalists – often disrupted ongoing reporting and discouraged on-site coverage. In December, dozens of journalists were subjected to verbal and physical assaults while covering pro-EU protests in Tbilisi.<sup>53</sup> In Azerbaijan, journalist *Shahla Karim* was detained while reporting on an opposition rally against alleged electoral fraud.<sup>54</sup>

■ Thirty-two alerts documented how journalists who were not on assignment to cover public matters and events were assaulted or even shot at, sometimes sustaining serious injuries. *Azim Deniz*, editor-in-chief of the news website and online TV *Deniz Postası*, was shot in his stomach and leg near his house in Kayseri, Türkiye, on 5 February 2024.<sup>55</sup> Police apprehended the alleged shooter, who was remanded in custody pending trial.

■ The number of suspected or explicit threats to life, liberty, and health increased and diversified. Journalists faced smear campaigns, insults, legal summons and public protests. Much of this harassment – often a precursor to or instigator of physical attacks on journalists – occurred online. The involvement of politicians and media outlets further exacerbated the situation. In 2024, the Platform also recorded the first cases of AI-generated manipulation and attacks.

■ In Serbia, N1 television journalist *Vanja Đurić* and Nova S television journalist *Željko Veljković* were subjected to a torrent of online hate in January 2024, instigated by politicians from both the ruling and opposition parties. The case was reported to the Special Prosecutor's Office for High-Tech Crime.<sup>56</sup>

■ In Denmark, newspapers exposed thousands of false advertisement campaigns targeting journalists on Meta platforms. In response, DR and TV 2 launched a joint video campaign urging the giant tech platform to take responsibility for deep fake content. The Danish Ministry of Justice responded to the alert, describing the cases as "alarming" and confirmed an ongoing investigation.

■ Twelve alerts highlighted break-ins, damage to property, calls for funding cuts, and cyber-attacks – including one against Platform partner Reporters Without Borders – carried out with the intent to intimidate.

■ Member states have taken steps to address these issues. In Croatia, authorities indicted a suspect and imposed a restraining order preventing him from "approaching, establishing and maintaining contact with" journalist *Melita Vrsaljko*, who was physically assaulted on 15 July due to her journalistic work.<sup>57</sup> In Spain, the Government Spokesperson condemned threats against journalists made by a public official in Madrid.<sup>58</sup>

■ Platform partners urge member states to implement systematic and effective protective measures when journalists face imminent threats of physical harm. States are also encouraged to establish clear channels for journalists and media professionals to report abuses and seek redress, particularly for actions perpetrated by state or public officials.

52. Alert 'Journalists Covering 'Foreign Agents' Bill Protests Assaulted by Riot Police', <https://go.coe.int/YBoxC>

53. Alert 'Police Crack Down on Journalists Covering Pro-EU Protests', <https://go.coe.int/i1oVB>

54. Alert 'Azerbaijani Journalist Shahla Karim Forcibly Detained While Covering Opposition Candidate's Protest', <https://go.coe.int/9cNUv>

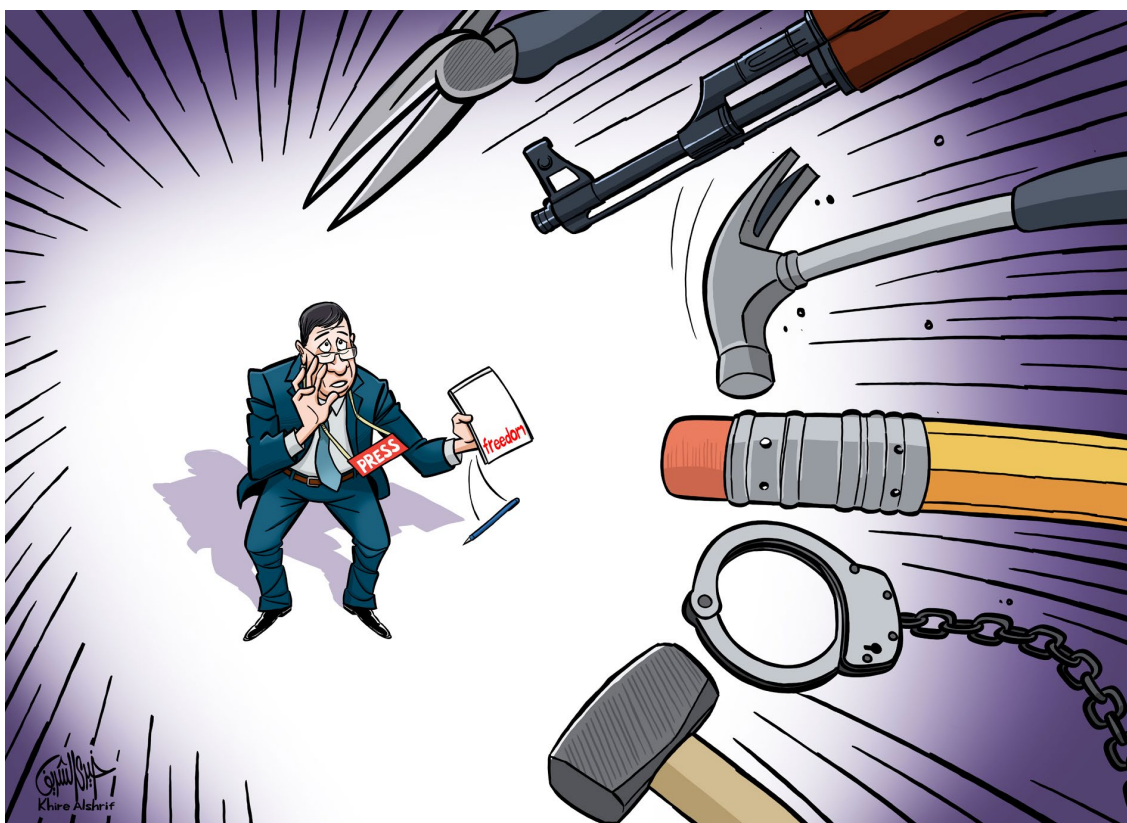
55. Alert 'Turkish Journalist Azim Deniz Shot and Wounded in Kayseri', <https://go.coe.int/7RTQL>

56. Alert 'Serbian Journalists Vanja Đurić and Željko Veljković Harassed Online', <https://go.coe.int/aNcfG>

57. Alert 'Faktograf Journalist Melita Vrsaljko Assaulted in the Street and at her Home', <https://go.coe.int/JuBwT>

58. Alert 'Madrid Community Official Threatens and Doxes Journalists Over News Reports', <https://go.coe.int/g16vh>





*Khire Alshrif (Libya) / Cartooning for Peace*

### **Melita Vrsaljko: 'I had no choice but to fight back'**

*Melita Vrsaljko is a journalist at the fact-checking website Faktograf - Association for the Informed Public, Croatia*

This year [2024] I was attacked twice in two days because of my environmental reporting.

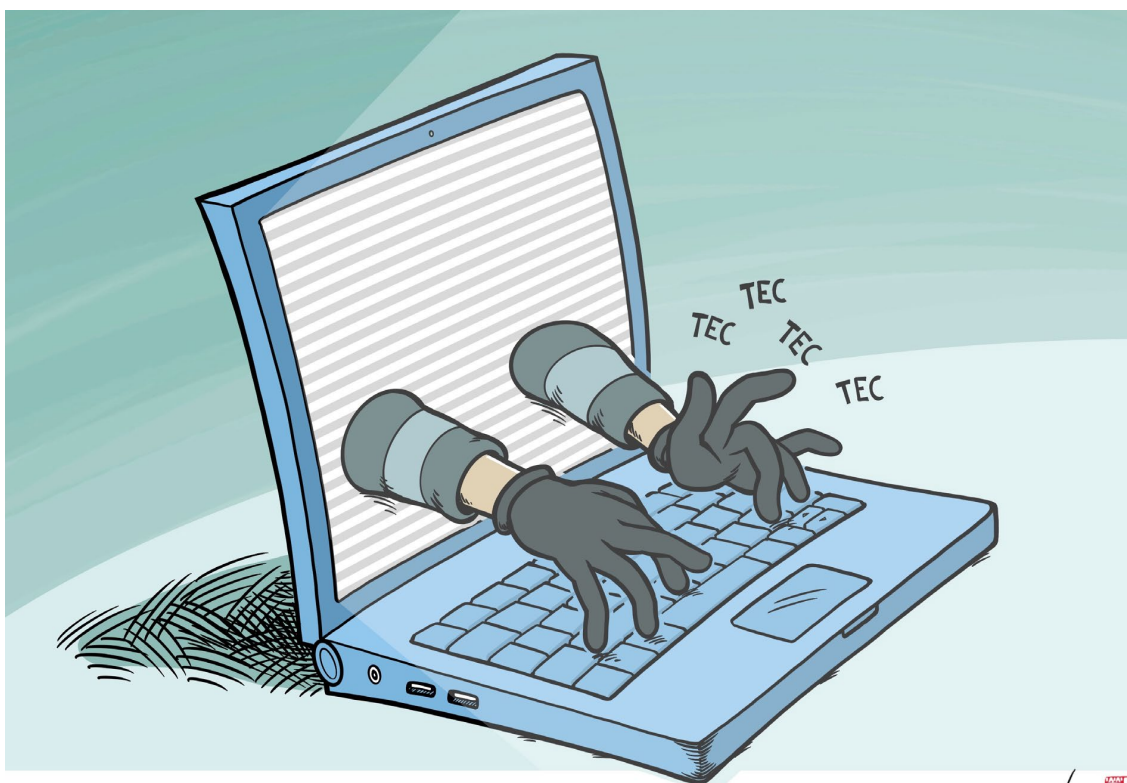
On 15 July, I was walking with a cameraman past an illegal waste dump in Nadin. We intended to film the site from a public road when an elderly man approached us aggressively. He first threatened my colleague with violence before grabbing my arm and snatching my phone. Throughout the encounter, I repeatedly stated, "I am a journalist." To protect myself, I had no choice but to fight back. Despite being the one targeted, the police held both me and my assailant equally responsible for disturbing public order. I managed to record a brief video of the attack, which I later posted on my Instagram story.

The following day, I was assaulted at my home by the attacker's daughter, a 36-year-old woman who had been harassing me throughout the day via phone, demanding that I delete the footage of her father. Three hours after her last message, she showed up at my house and attacked me. She grabbed my phone and hair, then began to choke me. I had to defend myself, retrieve my phone, and call the police. I was left with bruises, scars, and throat pain from the encounter.

The attackers are related to a counsellor in the Zadar County Assembly and a member of the ruling party. For months after the attacks, I did not feel safe in my own home.

The police categorised the attack as a misdemeanour that occurred in a public place, despite the fact that it happened in my home. They justified this classification by claiming that the noise could be heard from the street, causing a disturbance of public order. We have since filed a criminal complaint regarding the attack.

While physical violence against journalists in Croatia is rare, my case serves as a stark reminder of the need for improvement in how police handle criminal offenses against journalists and media workers. Protocols established by the Ministry of Interior and journalists' unions must be implemented more effectively to ensure the safety of journalists. No journalist should have to fear for their safety - least of all in their own home.



ponto final. rodrigo

Rodrigo (Portugal) / Cartooning for Peace

### Denigration and cybersquatting attacks on Reporters Without Borders

On 23 July, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) - a partner of the Platform - filed a criminal complaint with the Paris Public Prosecutor's Office for suspected identity theft and deceptive commercial practices. This followed RSF's discovery that a communications agency linked to the French media conglomerate *Vivendi* had created a fake website using RSF's name and logo as part of a broader and unprecedented disinformation campaign.

On 13 February, France's Council of State had instructed *Arcom* to reassess an RSF petition on safeguarding independent and pluralistic reporting by *CNews*, a *Vivendi*-owned channel under Vincent Bollore's *Bollore Group*. Soon after, RSF faced censorship accusations on *CNews* and another *Vivendi*-owned outlet - *Europe1* radio.

An RSF investigation found that *Progressif Media*, partly owned by *Vivendi*, orchestrated a campaign to discredit RSF. The agency created a fake RSF webpage, renamed the organisation "Sectarians Without Borders," purchased similar domain names to mislead users, and disseminated anti-RSF propaganda, including pre-written hate messages for posting on X. *Progressif Media* also paid to boost the fake website's Google ranking.

An internal document obtained by RSF, titled *Vivendi Reporting*, outlined the campaign in detail. Produced by *Progressif Media* for *Vivendi*, the document revealed that five domain names had been purchased to "dominate Google's ranking" and propagate a "manifesto on RSF's sectarianism." The document clearly described a strategic cyber-attack utilising a technique known as 'typosquatting'.

Later in 2024, RSF was targeted by a Russian disinformation campaign using a fake *BBC*-branded video falsely citing an RSF study alleging 'Nazi tendencies' among Ukrainian soldiers. The video misused RSF's logo, visual identity, and an image of its Advocacy Director, and was amplified by pro-Kremlin influencers.<sup>59</sup>

On 13 November 2024, RSF filed criminal charges against X for failing to remove the false content, citing identity theft, defamation, and complicity.<sup>60</sup> Since July 2024, RSF has been targeted by four videos exploiting its logo and reputation for Kremlin propaganda, with the deceptive content still online despite reports.

59. RSF investigation 'How did Russia use a fake video about RSF as war propaganda?' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ny71wKs23M>

60. RSF presses criminal charges against X (formerly Twitter) for its participation in identity theft and spreading disinformation, <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-presses-criminal-charges-against-x-formerly-twitter-its-participation-identity-theft-and>



# Countering SLAPPs: advancing legal protections for journalists in Europe

**O**n 5 April 2024, the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers adopted *Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)2* on countering the use of SLAPPs.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, the European Union enacted *Directive 2024/1069*, aimed at protecting those engaged in public participation from unfounded claims or abusive court proceedings.<sup>62</sup> EU member states have until 2026 to transpose the directive into national law. (See section on the European Union)

■ Both instruments establish minimum standards for procedural safeguards, remedies, transparency and support for SLAPP victims. The *EU Directive* focuses on cross-border civil SLAPPs cases, which account for about 9% of cases, according to the *Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE)*.<sup>63</sup> In contrast, the *Council of Europe Recommendation*, which is non-binding, is broader in scope, covering all types of SLAPPs and providing stronger safeguards and remedies.

■ These anti-SLAPP standards represent a significant step forward in protecting journalists, media outlets, and public watchdogs. For meaningful impact, both instruments must be implemented together, and member states should adopt comprehensive measures to combat SLAPPs. Effective anti-SLAPP laws should include provisions for the early dismissal of cases, security for legal costs, restitution for wrongful suits, and compensation for damages. Transparent court procedures, including the publication of rulings, are crucial for ensuring accountability.

*European anti-SLAPP standards represent a significant step forward in protecting journalists. For meaningful impact, both instruments must be implemented together.*

■ Initial analysis of the legal and policy framework in the Western Balkans is already underway and shows that member states have various options to implement these standards. These include introducing standalone anti-SLAPP laws (*lex specialis*), amending civil procedural codes to allow for the early dismissal of SLAPPs, or revising existing legislation to incorporate the procedural safeguards and remedies outlined in these instruments.<sup>64</sup>

■ Malta has transposed the EU directive against SLAPPs, which covers only cross-border SLAPPs. Civil society organisations have reacted, stating that Malta has missed an opportunity to provide comprehensive anti-SLAPP protection and set an example for other nations.<sup>65</sup>

■ During a mission to Ireland in October 2024, the Platform partners engaged with the Department of Justice, which outlined how the *EU Anti-SLAPP Directive* is being transposed into Irish law through the forthcoming Defamation (Amendment) Bill.<sup>66</sup> However, as these provisions are limited to abusive legal threats involving defamation, further legislation will be required to fully implement the Directive.

61. *Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)2* of the Committee of Ministers to member states on countering the use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680af2805>

62. *Directive (EU) 2024/1069* of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 on protecting persons who engage in public participation from manifestly unfounded claims or abusive court proceedings ('Strategic lawsuits against public participation'), Article 12, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L\\_202401069](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202401069)

63. SLAPPs: A threat to democracy continues to grow, 2023 update report, Page 9, <https://www.the-case.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/20230703-CASE-UPDATE-REPORT-2023-1.pdf>

64. Regional Baseline Assessment of Legislative and Policy Needs for Implementing Council of Europe and European Union Standards on Countering the Use of SLAPPs, Council of Europe, December 2024, <https://rm.coe.int/regional-baseline-assessment-of-legislative-and-policy-needs-for-imple/1680b2e38f>

65. Malta transposes EU's anti-SLAPP directive, <https://timesofmalta.com/article/malta-transposes-eu-antislapp-directive.1096145>

66. Minister McEntee and Minister Browne Publish Defamation Bill, <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/d297d-minister-mcentee-and-minister-browne-publish-defamation-bill/>

■ The implementation of these standards is essential to ensuring the legal security and protection of journalists, who remain frequent targets of abuse legal claims, including SLAPPs. In Slovakia, Prime Minister Robert Fico filed a SLAPP lawsuit against *Peter Bárty*, editor-in-chief of *Aktuality.sk*, and the publisher, objecting to the use of his photograph on the cover of Bárty's book, *Fico. Obsessed with Power*. The Prime Minister is seeking an apology and €100,000 in damages from each party.<sup>67</sup> Media Freedom Rapid Response assessed the lawsuit as meeting key SLAPP criteria.<sup>68</sup>

■ In January 2024, a court in Northern Ireland dismissed a case against journalist *Malachi O'Doherty*. He had referred in an interview to a sitting politician, a former member of the *Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA)*, who had filed for defamation.<sup>69</sup> 'On the balance of probabilities therefore the proceedings do bear the hallmarks of a SLAPP and have been initiated not for the genuine purposes of vindicating a reputation injured by defamatory statements, but rather for the purpose of stifling the voices of his troublesome critics,' the written judgment said.<sup>70</sup>

■ Research shows that most SLAPP cases are based on national defamation laws or similar provisions on insult or honour, making these the most common legal basis for suing journalists.<sup>71</sup> On 23 September 2024, the Shevchenkivskyi District Court in Kyiv ruled in favour of Ukrainian politician Andriy Portnov in a defamation case against *Statewatch*, *The Kyiv Independent*, and *Lb.ua*.<sup>72</sup> The court ordered the outlets to rectify their claims and pay Portnov 80,000 hryvnias (€1,739.37).

■ Defamation laws and practices are a systemic obstacle to media freedom in several CoE member states. In September 2024, Platform partners issued the first set of systemic alerts regarding defamation laws and practices affecting freedom of expression in the following member states of the Council of Europe: Azerbaijan, Croatia, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Serbia, Türkiye, and the United Kingdom.<sup>73</sup> These alerts call for urgent actions, including decriminalising insult and defamation related to public interest reporting, aligning national laws with European standards on freedom of expression, and implementing legal safeguards against SLAPPs.

■ A key priority should be building the capacity of legal professionals across Europe. In December 2024, the Council of Europe launched a training programme on countering SLAPPs, targeting judges, prosecutors, police officers, and legal professionals.<sup>74</sup> The curriculum enables participants to identify SLAPPs and apply appropriate safeguards. The *PRO-FREX* project in the Western Balkans offers a replicable model for strengthening capacity across Europe.<sup>75</sup>

■ Raising awareness of SLAPPs' threat to democracy is essential. Highlighting their impact on victims and democratic processes can foster support for stronger protections and build solidarity with those affected, reinforcing democratic values across Europe.

67. Alert 'Prime Minister Sues Aktuality.sk Editor-in-Chief and Publisher Over Use of a Picture' <https://go.coe.int/h2eNC>

68. Slovakia's Prime Minister launches SLAPP case against leading investigative journalist <https://www.mfrr.eu/slovakias-prime-minister-launches-slapp-case-against-leading-investigative-journalist/>

69. Alert 'Northern Ireland Parliamentary Files Lawsuits against Journalists', <https://go.coe.int/3suce>

70. <https://www.judiciaryni.uk/files/judiciaryni/decisions/Gerard%20Kelly%20and%20Malachi%20O%E2%80%99Doherty.pdf>

71. SLAPPs: A threat to democracy continues to grow, 2023 update report, Page 16, <https://www.the-case.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/20230703-CASE-UPDATE-REPORT-2023-1.pdf>

72. Alert 'Several Media Outlets Sentenced in Defamation Case' <https://go.coe.int/sTg8o>

73. Systemic alerts on the Safety of Journalists Platform <https://fom.coe.int/en/pagesspeciales/detail/93>

74. Council of Europe training programme on countering the use of SLAPPs, <https://rm.coe.int/council-of-europe-training-programme-on-countering-the-use-of-slapps/1680b2a058>

75. Protecting freedom of expression and of the media, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/pristina/protecting-freedom-of-expression-and-of-the-media-pro-frex-k>

# Impunity: justice delayed is justice denied

**T**he murder of journalists remains one of the most heinous attacks on press freedom, yet accountability for such crimes is alarmingly rare. In 2024, as in previous years, impunity for these acts persisted, with perpetrators going unpunished in most cases. This culture of impunity not only silences critical voices but also undermines public trust in justice systems and emboldens further violence against the press.

■ Across Europe, numerous cases highlighted the systemic failures in investigating and prosecuting crimes against journalists. From long-standing unresolved cases to recent acquittals, these examples underscore the urgent need for stronger safeguards, effective investigations, and robust legal frameworks to protect journalists and uphold the rule of law.



*Behrang Jeddi (Iran) /Cartooning for Peace*

■ In Serbia, the Belgrade Court of Appeals acquitted four former members of the Serbian secret service (RDB) in a ruling published on 2 February 2024. They had previously been convicted of the murder of Serbian journalist Slavko Ćuruvija on 11 April 1999. Ćuruvija, the owner of *Dnevni Telegraph* and *Evropljanin*, was known for his criticism of Slobodan Milošević. The court concluded that, in the absence of reliable direct or indirect evidence, the allegations had not been proven beyond reasonable doubt.

■ The ruling represents a significant setback,<sup>76</sup> sending the message that perpetrators and masterminds of crimes against journalists can operate with impunity. It demoralises victims' families and disheartens journalists and civil society from pursuing justice, even after 25 years of proceedings. It also undermines public confidence in the judiciary's independence, a recurring concern in Serbia.<sup>77</sup>

76. Alert 'Defendants in the 1999 Murder of Journalist Slavko Ćuruvija Acquitted', <https://go.coe.int/2zc1r>

77. European Commission, Serbia 2024 Report [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902\\_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf)

■ The *Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation* has appealed to the Supreme Court to assess whether the appellate proceedings adhered to the rule of law. Veran Matić, the Foundation's president, stated that key prosecution witnesses withdrew their testimonies during the appeal, citing concerns for their safety. The Foundation now faces at least three defamation lawsuits filed by the defendants over comments on the acquittal.<sup>78</sup>

*Across Europe, numerous cases highlighted the systemic failures in investigating and prosecuting crimes against journalists.*

■ In Poland, the long-standing case of journalist *Jarosław Ziętara*, who disappeared in September 1992 in Poznań, also ended in acquittals in 2024.<sup>79</sup> Ziętara, who wrote investigative reports exposing alleged corruption involving officials and secret services, was believed to have been murdered due to his work. The Krakow Public Prosecutor's Office reopened the investigation in 2011, identifying a businessman and former senator as the instigator and two security guards as accomplices. However, the Poznań District Court acquitted all defendants in October 2022, citing a lack of evidence. This verdict was upheld by the Poznań Court of Appeals on 19 January 2024.

■ The prosecution has petitioned the Supreme Court to review the case. Additionally, the Media Council urged the Minister of Justice and Prosecutor General to extend the investigation to suspects repeatedly mentioned by witnesses and to declassify files from 1991–1992 held by the Office for State Protection (UOP).<sup>80</sup>

■ In Greece, justice remains elusive for the murders of journalists *Giorgos Karaivaz* (9 April 2021) and *Sokratis Giolias* (19 July 2010). Two suspects arrested in April 2023 for Karaivaz's murder were acquitted on 31 July 2024.<sup>81</sup> Just days before the verdict, the prosecution revealed that a CD containing data from Karaivaz's phone had been damaged. The CD, which reportedly included contacts such as a former head of intelligence and another high-ranking official was critical evidence. Both officials had resigned following revelations of a wiretapping scandal, raising questions about the authorities' handling of the investigation.<sup>82</sup>

■ Sokratis Giolias was shot dead outside his home by two men dressed as police officers. Although an anarchist group claimed responsibility in 2010, the case remains unsolved.<sup>83</sup> Greek authorities informed Platform partners in March 2024 that the investigation is on hold due to insufficient evidence. A 2023 report from the 'A Safer World for the Truth' project criticised the investigation for delays and failures to follow critical leads,<sup>84</sup> recommending that the case be reopened with Europol's assistance.<sup>85</sup>

■ Two cases in the Russian Federation have led on 30 January 2024 to a judgment of the European Court of Human Rights.<sup>86</sup> *Akhmednabi Akhmednabiyev*, a journalist for the Russian media *Novoye Delo and Kavkazki Uzel*, was shot dead on 9 July 2013 in Dagestan.<sup>87</sup> *Khadzhimurad Kamalov*, a journalist and editor of the newspaper *Chernovik*, was killed on 15 December 2011 in Makhachkala.<sup>88</sup> Along with six other journalists, both Akhmednabiyev and Kamalov had received death threats in 2009, and Akhmednabiyev had been the victim of a first assassination attempt in January 2013.

■ The Court ruled that a state's failure to effectively investigate security risks to journalists or protect their right to life constitutes a violation of Article 2 of the Convention. While four individuals were convicted in 2022 for Kamalov's murder, the investigation into Akhmednabiyev's killing has been suspended and reopened multiple times and remains ongoing.

78. Statement of the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation <https://www.slavkocuruvijafondacija.rs/en/slavko-curuvija-foundation-is-shocked-by-the-court-of-appeal-verdict-a-country-not-punishing-murderers-has-no-future/>

79. Alert 'Impunity in 1992 Killing of Polish Journalist Jarosław Ziętara', <https://go.coe.int/SdFwn>

80. Press, 'Rada Polskich Mediów zaapelowała o podjęcie śledztwa w sprawie zabójstwa Jarosława Ziętary', <https://www.press.pl/tresc/83336,rada-polskich-mediow-zaapelowala-o-podjecie-sledztwa-w-sprawie-zabojstwa-jaroslaw-zietary>

81. Alert 'Impunity for Murder of Veteran Crime Reporter Giorgos Karaivaz', <https://go.coe.int/gCFX1>

82. International Press Institute, 'Who killed Giorgos Karaivaz', <https://ipi.media/who-killed-giorgos-karaivaz-greece/>

83. Alert 'Impunity in Killing of Greek Investigative Journalist and Broadcaster Sokratis Giolias', <https://go.coe.int/cP9ZN>

84. Reporters Without Borders 'Greek authorities failed to investigate journalist murders, find press freedom organisations', <https://rsf.org/en/greek-authorities-failed-investigate-journalist-murders-find-press-freedom-organizations>

85. Free Press Unlimited 'Impunity in Europe: Uninvestigated Murder of Greek Journalist Sokratis Giolias', <https://www.saferworldforthetruth.com/investigations/impunity-in-europe-uninvestigated-murder-of-greek-journalist-sokratis-giolias>

86. European Court of Human Rights, *Akhmednabiyev and Kamalov v. Russia*, applications Nos. 34358/16 and 58535/16, judgment of 30 January 2024, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-230625>

87. Alert 'Independent Journalist, Akhmednabi Akhmednabiyev, Shot Dead in Dagestan, Russia', <https://go.coe.int/zP5Yk>

88. Reporters Without Borders 'Leading independent journalist gunned down in Dagestan', <https://rsf.org/en/leading-independent-journalist-gunned-down-dagestan>

## Cases on the Platform concerning impunity for the murder of journalists

Giorgos KARAIVAZ – Greece - 2021

Ján KUCIAK – Slovakia – 2018

Jamal KHASHOGGI – Saudi Arabia Consulate in Türkiye – 2018

Daphne CARUANA GALIZIA – Malta – 2017

Saaed KARIMIAN – Türkiye – 2017

Pavel SHEREMET – Ukraine – 2016

Rohat AKTAŞ – Türkiye – 2016

Naji JERF – Türkiye – 2015

Timur KUASHEV – Russia – 2014

Andrea ROCCELLI and Andrei MIRONOV – Ukraine – 2014

Oleksandr KUCHYNSK – Ukraine – 2014

Mikhail BEKETOV – Russia – 2013

Akhmednabi AKHMEDNABIYEV – Russia – 2013

Nikolai POTAPOV – Russia – 2013

Rafiq TAGI – Azerbaijan – 2011

Gadzhimurad KAMALOV – Russia – 2011

Sokratis GIOLIAS – Greece - 2010

Aleh BYABENIN – Belarus - 2010

Hrant DINK – Türkiye – 2007

Anna POLITKOVSKAYA – Russia – 2006

Elmar HUSEYNOV – Azerbaijan – 2005

Dusko JOVANOVIĆ – Montenegro – 2004

Yuri SHCHEKOCHIKHIN – Russia - 2003

Milan PANTIĆ – Serbia - 2001

Martin O'HAGAN – United Kingdom – 2001

Georgiy GONGADZE – Ukraine – 2000

Slavko ĆURUVIJA – Serbia - 1999

Kutlu ADALI – Cyprus - 1996

Dada VUJASINOVIĆ – Serbia – 1994

Uğur MUMCU – Türkiye – 1993

Jarosław ZIĘTARA – Poland - 1992

Impunity for the killings, kidnappings and disappearances of journalists in Kosovo\* between 1998 and 2005: Senol ALIT (1999), Bardhyl AJETI (2005), Ismail BĚRBATOVCİ (1998), Vladimir DOBRIČIĆ (1998), Gabriel GRÜNER (1999), Bekim KASTRATI (2001), Volker KRÄMER (1999), Xhemajl MUSTAFA (2000), Shefki POPOVA (2000), Marian MELONAŠI (2000), Momir STOKUĆA (1999), Krist GEGAJ (1999), Aleksandar SIMOVIĆ (1999), Ljubomir KNEŽEVIĆ (1999), Enver MALOKU (1999), Afrim MALIQI (1998), Nebojša RADOŠEVIĆ (1998), Duro SLAVUJ and Ranko PERENIĆ (1998)

\*All references to Kosovo, whether to territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

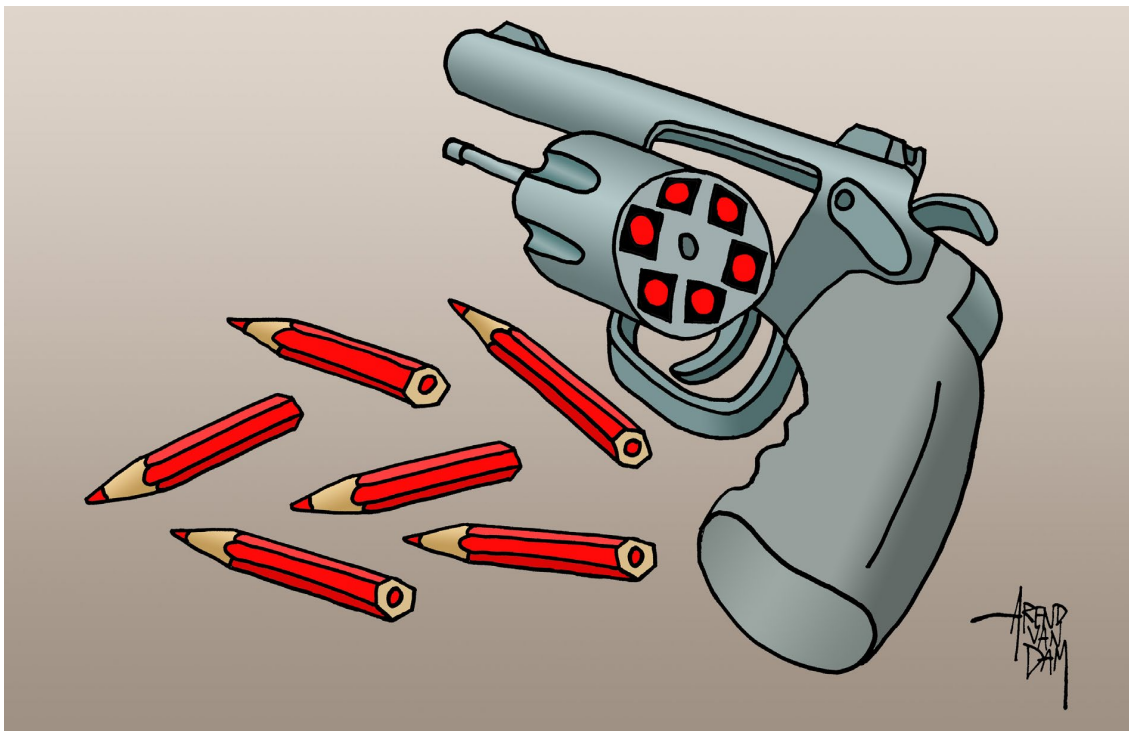
## Vladyslav Yesypenko must be released

Vladyslav Yesypenko, a journalist who contributed to *Crimea.Realities*, a regional news outlet of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (RFE/RL)'s Ukrainian Service, remains in detention in Crimea since 10 March 2021. He was arrested by Russia's *Federal Security Service* (FSB) in Simferopol and charged with "possession and transport of explosives." On 16 February 2022, a Russian judge in occupied Crimea sentenced him to six years in prison in a closed-door trial. On 18 August 2022, the Moscow-controlled Supreme Court of Crimea shortened his prison term to five years. Yesypenko firmly denies all the accusations, and his wife leads the campaign for his release.

After his arrest, Vladyslav Yesypenko was detained incommunicado. According to RFE/RL, during his trial, Vladyslav said he was tortured with electric shocks to extract a confession. Recalling the torture, he said: "My eyes hurt and my brain almost boiled... I was ready to sign anything or tell them anything." His lawyers also reported numerous other violations that undermined his fair trial.

Vladyslav Yesypenko is the recipient of a Free Media Award from the *Fritt Ord Foundation* (Norway) and *ZEIT-Stiftung* for his reporting in Crimea following its illegal annexation by Russia. In 2022, he received the *PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Award*, which his wife Kateryna accepted with their young daughter, Stefania.

The partner organisations of the Safety of Journalists Platform call for Vladyslav Yesypenko's immediate release.



Arend Van Dam (Netherlands) / Cartooning for Peace

# Journalists and other media actors in detention in Europe<sup>89</sup>

## Member states of the Council of Europe

### Azerbaijan (30)

Akif Gurbanov	Bahruz Samadov	Musfiq Cabbar
Alasgar Mammadli	Elnara Gasimova	Nargiz Absalamova
Ali Zeynal	Elnur Shukurov	Natig Javadli
Arshad Ibrahimov	Farid Mehralizada	Osman Narimanoglu Rzayev
Aslan Gurbanov	Hafiz Babali	Polad Aslanov
Avaz Zeynalli	Ibrahim Humbatov	Ramil Babayev
Aynur Elgunesh	Ilkin Amrahov	Ramin Jabrayilzade
Aysel Umudova	Imran Aliyev	Rashad Ramazanov
Aytaj Ahmadova	Khayala Aghayeva	Sevinc Vaqifqizi
Aziz Orujov	Mahammad Kekalov	Ulvi Hasanli

### Georgia (1)

Afgan Sadigov

### Türkiye (27)

Ahmet Metin Sekizkardeş	Gültekin Avcı	Murat Verim
Ali Ahmet Böken	Hatice Duman	Mustafa Gök
Ali Ünal	Hayri Tunç	Osman Akın
Bilge Aksu	Hidayet Karaca	Pınar Gayıp
Can Papila	Ismail Çoban	Sadık Topaloğlu
Enes Sezgin	Kenan Karavil	Şeref Yılmaz
Erdal Süsem	Mehmet Baransu	Serpil Ünal
Erol Zavar	Mehmet Uçar	Ziya Ataman
Gülistan Dursun	Murat Çapan	

89. As of 31 December 2024, there were 159 journalists and other media actors in detention in Europe. The updated list of detentions can be found here: <https://fom.coe.int/en/listejournalistes/detentions>



## Ukraine (territories temporarily occupied by Russia) (28)<sup>90</sup>

Amet Suleymanov	Kostiantyn Zinovkin	Rustem Sheikhaliev
Anastasiya Glukhovska	Maksym Rupchov	Serhiy Tsyhipa
Asan Akhtemov	Mark Kaliush	Server Mustafayev
Aziz Azizov	Marlen Asanov	Seyran Saliev
Dmytro Khilyuk	Oleksandr Malyshev	Timur Ibragimov
Ernes Ametov	Osman Arifmemetov	Vilen Temeryanov
Heorhiy Levchenko	Remzi Bekirov	Vladislav Yesypenko
Iryna Danilovich	Ruslan Suleymanov	Yana Suvorova
Iryna Levchenko	Rustem Osmanov	Yevhenii Ilchenko
Zhanna Kyselova		

## Other European countries and regions

### Belarus (44)

Alena Tsimashchuk	Dzmitry Navazhylau	Uladzimir Yanukevich
Ales Lyubychuk	Ihar Ilyash	Valerija Kastsyuhova
Ales Marchanka	Ihar Karnei	Volha Radzivonava
Ales Sabaleuski	Ihar Losik	Vyacheslau Lazara
Aliaksandr Ignatsiuk	Iryna Slaunikava	Yauhen Hlushkou
Aliaksandr Ziankou	Ivan Murauyou	Yauhen Merkis
Alyaksandr Mantsevich	Kanstantsin Zalatych	Yauhen Nikalayevich
Andrei Aliaksandrau	Katsiaryna Andreeva	Dzmitry Semchanka
Andrei Famin	Larysa Shchyryakova	undisclosed
Andrei Kuznechyk	Lyudmila Chekina	undisclosed
Andrei Tolchyn	Maryna Zolatava	undisclosed
Andrzej Poczobut	Pavel Mazhejka	undisclosed
Anton Kazelski	Pavel Padabed	undisclosed
Daniil Palianski	Siarhei Chabotska	undisclosed
Dzianis Ivashyn	Siarhei Satsuk	

### Russia<sup>91</sup> (29)

Abdulmumin Gadzhiev	Eduard Shmonin	Ruslan Ushakov
Aleksandr Dorogov	Igor Kuznetsov	Sergey Karelin
Aleksandra Bayazitova	Ivan Safronov	Sergey Kustov
Aleksei Slobodenyuk	Konstantin Gabov	Sergey Mikhaylov
Alexander Nozdrinov	Maria Ponomarenko	Sergey Mingazov
Andrei Novashov	Mikhail Afanasyev	Vladislav Malushenko
Antonina Favorskaya	Mikhail Lebedev	Yan Katelevskiy
Artem Kriger	Nika Novak	Yevgeny Kurakin
Denis Shaikin	Parvinakhan Abuzarova	Yevgeny Moskvina
Dmitry Ivanov	Roman Ivanov	

90. Journalists detained by the Russian occupying authorities

91. Expelled from the Council of Europe on 16 March 2022



## By invitation. Kak: 'Are we still Charlie?'



"Self-portrait"

Kak (France) / Cartooning for Peace

Ten years after the Charlie Hebdo and Hyper Cacher massacres in Paris, would we still be taking to the streets to defend the right to satire, humour and, more broadly, our freedom of expression and the rejection of all forms of violence?

While France reflects on the anniversary of the 7 January 2015 attacks, commemorated this year, the global trend stands in stark contrast to the well-known declaration of solidarity, '*Je suis Charlie*' ('I am Charlie'). The number of countries where cartoonists can freely express themselves is steadily declining, and their profession faces increasing threats.

In most cases, these restrictions are imposed by the authorities in countries such as Russia, China, North Korea, Malaysia, Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. In some instances, they are further reinforced by the misuse of religion in theocratic regimes, as seen in Iran, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia.

To this already extensive list of identified dictatorships, we can now add democracies where leaders are increasingly veering towards authoritarianism and censorship, such as India, Türkiye, and Tunisia. A stark example is the criminal trial of Turkish cartoonist Zehra Ömeroğlu, who has faced charges of obscenity for four years. Her case has been marked by repeated postponements of hearings, subjecting her to a prolonged legal ordeal over a single drawing.

Arbitrary legal proceedings have become a recurring theme in the alerts published by Cartooning for Peace in recent months. One such case is that of Saudi cartoonist Al Hazza, who was recently sentenced to an additional 23 years in prison after already serving a six-year sentence, during which he was subjected to enforced disappearance and ill-treatment. Similarly, Egyptian cartoonist Ashraf Omar has been detained for nearly 100 days without any opportunity to defend his rights, having also suffered enforced disappearance and ill-treatment. Iranian cartoonist Atena Farghadani was sentenced to six years in prison following a violent arrest, and during a previous detention, she endured attempted poisoning and further mistreatment (fortunately, she was released in December 2024). The physical safety of each of these cartoonists in detention remains gravely at risk.

And then there are countries where the press remains free, yet the boundaries for cartoonists are increasingly narrowing, as seen in the United States, where 'offensive' opinions are swiftly erased. In many places the crucial fight against discrimination is being conflated with an oppressive culture of hypersensitivity. This growing constraint raises the question of whether Europe is on the verge of becoming one of the last bastions of press cartooning.

As we honour the memory of those who lost their lives at *Charlie Hebdo*, it is our duty - precisely because we are among the last ones standing - to boldly uphold the right to satire and freedom of the press. This is not driven by professional self-interest or mere symbolic allegiance; rather, it is an imperative, for independent journalism and critical thinking are the twin pillars of our freedom of expression.

The primary mission of press cartoonists is to keep alive the spirit of irreverence, critical thought, and non-conformity. They do so not only for themselves but, more importantly, for the public. If they are no longer free, neither are you.

Kak, President of Cartooning for Peace



*Bo Bojesen (Denmark) / Cartooning for Peace*

# Legislation as a weapon: stifling journalistic freedom

Several countries in Europe have adopted - or attempted to pass - legislation that restricts press freedom. Georgia and Slovakia were notable areas of concern, but other countries have also faced scrutiny.

■ On 3 July 2024, the Legal Committee of the Cyprus Parliament debated a proposed amendment to the Criminal Code concerning the dissemination of fake news, threats, insults, and obscene images online. The amendment aimed to convert several civil offences into criminal ones, with penalties including up to one year in prison and/or a fine of €3,000 for spreading 'fake news' or writing 'offensive' comments.<sup>92</sup>

■ Following appeals by journalists' organisations, the Cypriot Ministry of Justice, on 1 August 2024, announced the establishment of a committee of legal experts to explore alternative approaches to combating false, misleading, or deliberately harmful information. The Ministry emphasised the importance of protecting freedom of expression and media freedom. At the Minister's request, the Parliament's Law Committee suspended consideration of the bill pending broader consensus among stakeholders.<sup>93</sup>

*The fight against disinformation must not be used to legitimise attacks on press freedom or the right to inform and be informed.*

■ The fight against disinformation must not be used to legitimise attacks on press freedom or the right to inform and be informed. Yet this remains a pressing concern in Türkiye, where a 2022 'disinformation' law has been misused to target journalists. Former Minister of Justice Bekir Bozdağ claimed the law would only apply in cases of 'disturbance of public order and breach of social peace.' However, examples documented by the Platform's partners reveal that the law has been weaponised to numerous journalists, particularly those covering sensitive topics such as the 6 February 2023 earthquake, the 2023 Turkish general election, and investigative reporting.<sup>94</sup>

■ In 2024, the law's provisions led to the arrest and detention of journalist *Furkan Karabay*. On 8 November, Karabay, a reporter for the news website *10Haber*, had his home searched and was charged with 'insulting public officials,' 'targeting people responsible for fighting terrorism,' and 'disseminating misleading information to the public.'<sup>95</sup> A court document indicated that the charges stemmed from posts on his personal X account, in which he named Istanbul public prosecutors involved in an investigation against a former mayor affiliated with the Republican People's Party (CHP), accused of links to the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). On 18 November, the Istanbul 17th Criminal Court of First Instance ordered Karabay's release on appeal, ruling that his detention was inconsistent with the case file's contents and that judicial control measures could have been applied instead.

■ Türkiye has also considered additional restrictive measures. Proposed Penal Code amendments targeting 'agents of influence' would have threatened with imprisonment journalists working for media financed by international funds. Although the bill was withdrawn from parliamentary procedure in November 2024 following criticism, the risk of it being reintroduced remains. The country continues to employ various criminal laws to obstruct journalists' work, including provisions punishing 'insults,' with specific protections for the president and national symbols. Other criminal offences include 'praising an offence or an offender,' 'calling for disobedience of the law,' and 'disseminating misleading information.' These laws have been used by politicians and business figures to initiate legal proceedings against journalists, often resulting in lengthy trials and severe custodial sentences.

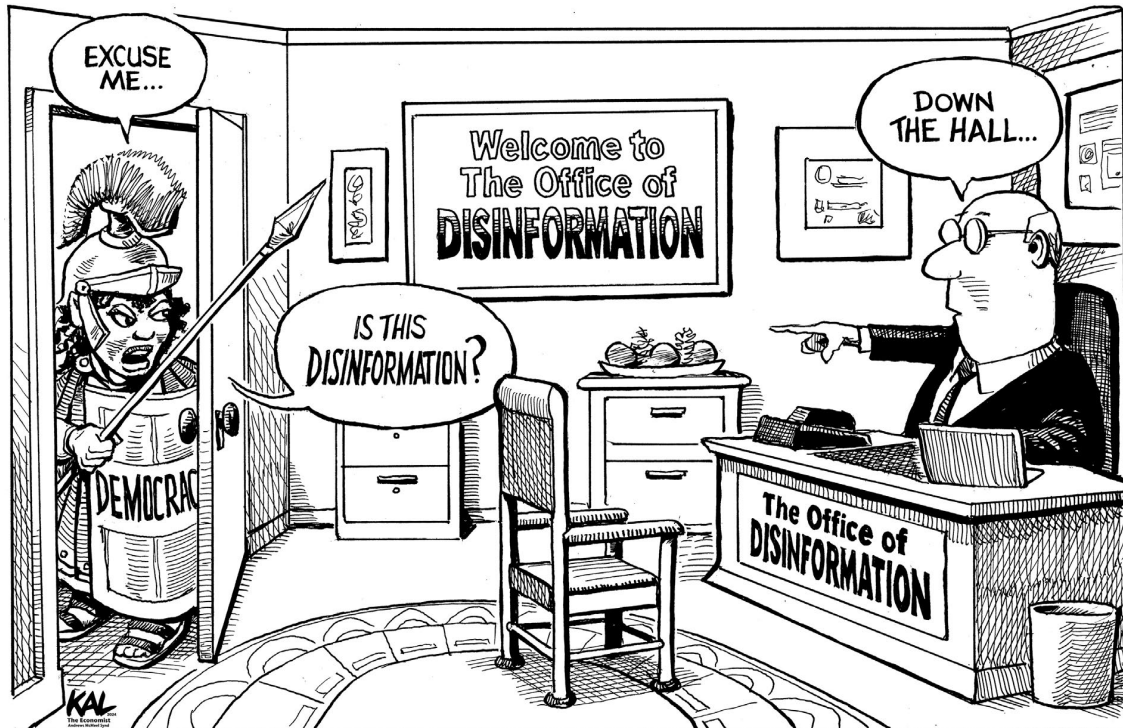
92. Alert 'Proposal to Criminalise "Fake News" in Cyprus', <https://go.coe.int/IDCES>

93. Reply of the authorities of the Republic of Cyprus regarding the alert 'Proposal to Criminalise "Fake News" in Cyprus', <https://rm.coe.int/cyprus-en-reply-proposal-to-criminalise-fake-news-in-cyprus-4october20/1680b1d497>

94. Alert 'Journalists Prosecuted under Defamation, Insult and 'Anti-terrorism' Laws', <https://go.coe.int/56pkq>

95. Bianet, 'Journalist Furkan Karabay arrested over reporting, social media posts about municipal takeovers', <https://bianet.org/haber/journalist-furkan-karabay-arrested-over-reporting-social-media-posts-about-municipal-takeovers-301665>

■ In Azerbaijan, the Law on Media continues to stifle press freedom and must be revised. Among other provisions, it prohibits media from publishing or disseminating information containing 'immoral lexical content' or that 'humiliates a person's honour or dignity.' This legislation undermines the role of journalists as public watchdogs, further eroding media independence.



Kal (United States) / Cartooning for Peace

# Public Service Media: the battle for independence

**W**hile 2024 saw encouraging developments, such as the finalisation of the EMFA, which enshrines the editorial independence of PSM within the European Union, government interference in the governance, management, and funding of PSM persisted. Such actions have jeopardised their independence and undermined public trust in one of society's most vital institutions.

■ The latest *Media Pluralism Monitor* report, published in June 2024, which evaluates the state of media pluralism across 35 Council of Europe member states, raises concerns about the independence of public service media in 13 countries regarding their management and financing.<sup>96</sup>

■ In Italy, the government has exerted increasing financial pressure on the public broadcaster, *Radiotelevisione Italiana* (RAI), which has been underfunded for years. RAI's five-year charter should align with a funding commitment of the same duration to allow them to plan effectively. In Slovakia, the government replaced the public broadcaster, *Radio and Television Slovakia* (RTVS), with a new legal body, *Slovak Television and Radio* (STVR). The Director General was replaced before the expiration of his mandate and most members of the new board have yet to be appointed.

*In Poland, recent government actions have raised hopes for more independence for public broadcasters.*

■ In Poland, recent government actions have raised hopes for more independence for public broadcasters, *Telewizja Polska* (TVP) and *Polskie Radio* (PR), in conformity with the obligations set out in the EMFA.<sup>97</sup> The proposed reforms include restoring the independence of the media regulator, the National Broadcasting Council (KRRiT), and revising funding models for public broadcasters. They aim to ensure transparent recruitment processes for senior management and provide predictable funding sources, reducing political and commercial pressures. The risk of politicisation of the KRRiT remains. It is necessary to clarify the powers of the KRRiT to control broadcasts and impose penalties on broadcasters.

■ Few question the evident need to ensure Poland's public media operate independently of government control. The government must ensure the political independence of the broadcaster and must build safeguards to guarantee its future independence, and that of the media regulator. Director General of TVP, Tomasz Sygut, expressed optimism, underscoring the importance of safeguarding both independence and funding to maintain PSM's role in society. However, upcoming presidential elections in May 2025 could place the progress of these reforms at risk. To truly secure independence for PSM, these legislative changes must be finalised and enacted. Without such protections, there is a danger that the reforms could stall or be undone by future governments.

■ Even in countries with traditionally robust PSM, challenges are emerging. In July 2024, the Irish government announced a new funding scheme guaranteeing *Raidió Teilifís Éireann* (RTÉ) €725 million over three years. However, this budget fails to address RTÉ's long-term financial needs and restricts the broadcaster's ability to make strategic decisions. The government has introduced a hybrid funding model, combining revenue from TV licence fees with direct government allocations.

96. Media Pluralism Monitor 2024 <https://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor-2024/>

97. International Press Institute, 'Poland must seize opportunity to be a model of reform and media freedoms', <https://ipi.media/poland-must-seize-opportunity-to-be-a-model-of-reform-and-media-freedoms/>

■ In addition, the Irish government has attached conditions to the exchequer (Treasury) funding, requiring RTE to implement a series of measures. These include staff reductions, outsourcing productions, adopting advanced technologies, and improving corporate governance and transparency. Further exacerbating the situation, the TV licence fee system has been frozen since 2008, despite inflation and a growing population. As a result, RTE has long been forced to rely on commercial income to sustain its operations.

■ For PSM to truly fulfil their mission of informing, educating, and entertaining the public, they require fully independent governance and management as well as adequate, long-term funding that is free of political strings. Public broadcasters need secure and predictable revenue sources that allow them to operate autonomously, with structures that shield them from both direct and indirect government control, as well as laws and funding structures that prioritise public access to free, independent media.

# Media capture: a strategy to exclude critical voices

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**M**edia capture, by governments, is the use and misuse of state powers to assert control over the media. It has five key elements: the political takeover of public service media, the control of media regulators, the acquisition of private media by political allies with government support, the marginalisation of critical media, and the discriminatory use of state funds to finance pro-government media.

Media capture asserts control by stealth, using apparently legal means to create economic and regulatory barriers to independent media, limiting their ability to generate income, operate and inform the public. It is a popular tool of authoritarian governments for controlling public information. Far from being a succession of isolated incidents it is part of a political strategy of control. Russia, along with Council of Europe member states Hungary and Türkiye, are prominent examples of media capture, with other governments seeking to follow their lead.

As public and policy maker awareness has grown about the threat posed to democracy, so efforts have increased to protect media independence. Most significant has been the EMFA. Its effectiveness will be judged by how countries implement key chapters on the independence of public service media and media regulators, ownership transparency, editorial independence, media pluralism, and the misuse of state funds.

Media capture often takes place under the monitoring radar. The Platform alerts do however signal media capture particularly where media regulators are under government control and used to make arbitrary decisions against journalists.

In Russia, *Article 19* - a partner of this Platform - along with *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (RFE/RL), *Moscow Times* and *SOTA*, were all designated “undesirable organisations”, banned from operating in the country and making anyone associated with them face up to six years in prison. In June the Ministry of Foreign Affairs added 81 media outlets from across Europe to an ever-expanding list of banned organisations and journalists in ‘retaliation’ for the European Union’s earlier decision to block four Kremlin-linked propaganda networks from broadcasting in Europe.

In Belarus, over twenty news sites were blocked on instruction from the Ministry of Information which identified them as ‘extremist’. In March the *Belapan* news agency was formally liquidated by the courts completing the state’s years long campaign against it including the jailing of four *Belapan* journalists in 2022.

In Türkiye, the broadcast regulator, RTÜK, suspended, fined, then eventually revoked the license of *Açık Radyo*, after a guest referred to the ‘commemoration of the Armenian genocide’. *Açık Radyo*, an independent non-profit radio founded in 1995, has long been a symbol of diverse, independent and human rights-centred journalism and its closure, on 16 October, is widely mourned. Numerous news sites and other journalistic content were also blocked by the courts.



# Beyond borders: combatting transnational repression of journalists

**G**overnments increasingly target journalists across borders in a bid to silence critical voices, particularly those in exile. Transnational repression involves infringing on individual rights through coercive actions initiated by one state that take effect in another.<sup>98</sup> This evolving tactic undermines the rule of law, human rights, and press freedom on a global scale.

■ The most extreme forms of transnational repression include physical attacks and even murders. A stark example was the 2018 assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. More recently, in March 2024, Iranian-British journalist Pouria Zeraati, working for London-based *Iran International*, was hospitalised after being stabbed by unidentified attackers near his London residence. Two persons were later arrested in Romania on 4 December in connection with the attack.<sup>99</sup>

■ Another manifestation of transnational repression is surveillance. In November 2024, a London prosecutor revealed that Bulgarian journalist Christo Grozev had been targeted by a Russian-led spy network operating in the UK. Grozev, a journalist for Bellingcat, is known for his investigations into the 2018 Salisbury *Novichok* attack and the poisoning of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Similarly, Roman Dobrokhoto, founder of the Russian media outlet *The Insider*, has reportedly been a target.<sup>100</sup>

■ Governments also misuse international mechanisms to harass exiled journalists. For instance, during Sweden's NATO accession negotiations, Türkiye unsuccessfully demanded the closure of Stockholm-based *Nordic Monitor*, an investigative news website run by exiled Turkish journalists.<sup>101</sup>

*The abuse of the Interpol system is one of the tactics used by States to harass exiled journalists.*

■ The abuse of the Interpol system is another tactic. Belarusian journalist Andrei Gnyot was detained in Serbia in October 2023 following an Interpol 'red notice' issued by Belarus.<sup>102</sup> He was held for over a year while Serbian courts reviewed the request. Gnyot was released in October 2024 after the legal detention period expired and immediately left for an EU country.

■ Azerbaijani journalist Afgan Sadigov was arrested in Georgia in August 2024 at Azerbaijan's request.<sup>103</sup> Georgian authorities blocked him from travelling to Türkiye and instead approved his extradition to Azerbaijan in November 2024.

■ Exiled journalists often face criminal charges or investigations designed to intimidate and discredit them. Russian journalists, including Mikhail Zygar,<sup>104</sup> Masha Gessen,<sup>105</sup> Dmitry Kolezev, Asya Zolnikova, and Andrei Soldatov,<sup>106</sup> have all been targeted with charges linked to their reporting on Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

98. Andrew Chubb, Kirsten Roberts Lyer 'Transnational Human Rights Violations: Addressing the Evolution of Globalised Repression through National Human Rights Institutions', <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huae017>

99. BBC, 'Two men charged over stabbing of Iranian journalist in UK', <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cqx8wgz3rgwo>

100. The Independent, 'London trio tracked journalists and dissidents as part of Russian spy ring, trial hears', <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/bulgarian-russian-spy-ring-trial-old-bailey-b2655370.html>

101. Alert 'Turkish Authorities Demand Closure of Investigative Website Nordic Monitor', <https://go.coe.int/0w7Yr>

102. Alert 'Belarusian Journalist Andrei Gnyot Faces Extradition from Serbia to Belarus', <https://go.coe.int/dmNR7>

103. Alert 'Azerbaijani Journalist Afgan Sadigov Detained at Request from Azerbaijan', <https://go.coe.int/jYHw4>

104. Alert 'Exiled Russian Journalist Mikhail Zygar Investigated on Charges of Spreading "False Information" about Russian Army', <https://go.coe.int/c4Pea>

105. Alert 'Russia Issues Arrest Warrant for Exiled Journalist Masha Gessen', <https://go.coe.int/WzXvJ>

106. Alert 'Exiled Journalist Dmitry Kolezev Arrested, Charged with "Disseminating False Information", Asya Zolnikova and Andrei Soldatov Face Administrative Charges', <https://go.coe.int/XWaeX>

■ Even journalists not in exile are at risk. In March 2024, British journalist Tom Rogan, based in Washington, D.C., was placed on Russia's wanted list. Both Rogan and Hugo Gurdon, editor-in-chief of the *Washington Examiner*, were added to Russia's database of "extremists" and "terrorists."<sup>107</sup>

■ Council of Europe member states have occasionally enforced restrictions at the behest of repressive regimes. In July 2024, Turkmen journalist Ruslan Myatiev, editor of the Netherlands-based *Turkmen.News*, was denied entry to Türkiye. Turkish authorities cited a security ban requested by Turkmenistan under code G-82, which refers to "activity against national security."<sup>108</sup>

■ Political rhetoric also plays a role in transnational repression. In March 2024, an Azerbaijani MP labelled several exiled journalists, including Sevinj Osmanqizi, Tural Sadıqlı and Qənimət Zəhid, as "legitimate targets" for their "informational terrorism" and criticism of Azerbaijan's president.<sup>109</sup>

■ Transnational repression has a chilling effect on press freedom, instilling fear and fostering self-censorship among journalists. The gravity of these threats underscores the urgent need for host countries to safeguard at-risk journalists and for the international community to hold offending states accountable. Responsibility lies not only with the states from which these threats originate but also with host countries where journalists seek refuge.

■ To effectively combat transnational repression, states must implement comprehensive legal and diplomatic measures to protect journalists at risk. Host countries should reinforce asylum policies and offer secure refuge to media professionals facing persecution. This includes accelerating asylum procedures for threatened journalists and providing specialised security support, such as personal protection measures and digital safety training. Additionally, legal frameworks should be strengthened to prevent the misuse of international mechanisms - such as Interpol 'red notices' - and to ensure that extradition requests targeting journalists are thoroughly scrutinised for potential political motives.

■ International cooperation is essential in addressing this challenge. The Council of Europe and the European Union should establish dedicated mechanisms to monitor, document, and respond to cases of transnational repression. Stronger sanctions and diplomatic measures must be directed at states that engage in such practices, reinforcing the international commitment to safeguarding press freedom.

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107. Alert 'British Journalist Tom Rogan Blacklisted on Undisclosed Charges', <https://go.coe.int/GVIA2>

108. Alert 'Turkmen.News Editor Ruslan Myatiev Banned from Entering Türkiye' <https://go.coe.int/MNzqU>

109. Alert 'Chairman of Parliamentary Human Rights Committee Calls for "Neutralisation" of Azerbaijani Journalists and Bloggers in Exile' <https://go.coe.int/i9IMG>

## Julian Assange, a precedent for press freedom at risk

The release of Julian Assange from high-security Belmarsh prison in the UK in June marked the conclusion of Europe's most high-profile case of journalistic incarceration. The Wikileaks founder flew to Australia via Saipan, a US overseas territory, where a plea deal was finalised in a US Federal Court. Assange pleaded guilty to a single charge under the Espionage Act and was sentenced to 62 months in prison, matching the exact duration of his pre-trial detention.<sup>110</sup>

While the conclusion of this protracted case has been welcomed by Assange's supporters, press freedom groups warn that the plea deal between Assange's legal team and the US government could set a dangerous precedent. Critics fear it may be used to prosecute journalists who expose misconduct by the US military and intelligence agencies in the future. In a September report authored by Icelandic parliamentarian Þórhildur Sunna Evarsdóttir, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's (PACE) Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights raised concerns about Assange's treatment. The report stated that his "disproportionately harsh treatment creates a dangerous chilling effect and a climate of self-censorship affecting all journalists, publishers, and others reporting matters essential for the functioning of a democratic society."<sup>111</sup>

Assange made his first public appearance following his release at a Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly meeting on 1 October. In a striking address, he declared, "I am not free today because the system worked. I am free today after years of incarceration because I pleaded guilty to journalism. I pleaded guilty to seeking information from a source, I pleaded guilty to obtaining information from a source."<sup>112</sup> He also revealed that, as part of the plea agreement, he had assured the US government that he would not pursue recourse through the European Court of Human Rights, effectively forgoing the opportunity to seek justice from the Court.

PACE subsequently held a plenary debate and adopted a resolution, which condemned the US prosecution,<sup>113</sup> stating that its perceived intent was 'to hide the wrongdoing of state agents rather than to protect national security'. The resolution called on the US to urgently reform the 1917 Espionage Act to exempt publishers, journalists, and whistleblowers who legitimately disclose classified information. Furthermore, it urged the United Kingdom to conduct an independent review of Assange's treatment by its authorities to determine whether he had been subjected to torture or inhumane or degrading treatment, in line with its international obligations.

110. Alert 'Continued Detention of WikiLeaks Founder and Publisher Julian Assange', <https://go.coe.int/2OXis>

111. PACE report "The detention and conviction of Julian Assange and their chilling effects on human rights", <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/33734/html>

112. Julian Assange at Parliamentary Assembly hearing, ahead of a plenary debate on his case: 'I pleaded guilty to journalism' <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/julian-assange-to-attend-a-pace-hearing-in-strasbourg-on-his-detention-and-conviction-and-their-chilling-effect-on-human-rights-1>

113. PACE resolution 'The detention and conviction of Julian Assange and their chilling effects on human rights' <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/33826>

# Journalism under siege in times of war

**A**s Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine enters its fourth year, the acute challenges faced by journalists remain pressing. Since the invasion began, at least 17 journalists and media professionals have been killed while performing their professional duties.<sup>114</sup> In 2024, seven incidents of journalists coming under fire were documented by Platform partners, including the killing of Reuters safety adviser Ryan Evans<sup>115</sup> in a Russian missile strike in eastern Ukraine. Nearly all incidents, including several cases of wounded journalists, are attributed to Russia. The death of Ukrainian journalist Viktoriya Roshchyna while in Russian custody shocked the press freedom community.<sup>116</sup>

■ The situation is especially concerning in the Russian-occupied territories, where even the basic protections provided under Russian law - such as transparency regarding charges and detention - are frequently ignored. In these territories independent journalism has been almost entirely eradicated, with Ukrainian journalists frequently arrested and subjected to mistreatment, torture, and forced labour.<sup>117</sup> Reports indicate inhumane conditions,<sup>118</sup> such as blogger Yevheniy Ilchenko being tortured and compelled to dig trenches for the Russian army.<sup>119</sup> In Ukraine's Crimea, imprisoned Crimean Tatar journalists face severe restrictions,<sup>120</sup> often relocated to remote prisons far from their families and restricted in their communication.<sup>121</sup>

■ The invasion has also led to the destruction of media offices and infrastructure in Ukraine, with six cases documented in 2024. Amidst these attacks, Ukrainian journalists face additional challenges, such as censorship under wartime regulations and government influence over broadcasting. The *United News telemarathon* continued to draw criticism for its pro-government bias, while independent outlets like *Ukrainska Pravda* reported pressure from the presidential office.<sup>122</sup> Surveillance,<sup>123</sup> intimidation, and attempts to silence investigative journalists, such as Yuriy Nikolov<sup>124</sup> and Yevhen Shulhat,<sup>125</sup> remain unresolved, raising concerns about accountability and press freedom.

■ In December 2024, the Ukrainian parliament debated a bill proposing eight-year prison sentences for publishing "confidential information" sourced from public databases during wartime. Critics have warned that this measure could be misused to target investigative journalists.<sup>126</sup>

114. Safety of Journalists Platform, 'Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine' <https://fom.coe.int/en/pagesspeciales/detail/1>

115. Alert 'Reuters Safety Adviser Ryan Evans Killed, 3 Journalists Injured in Missile Attack on Kramatorsk Hotel' <https://go.coe.int/tgG6i>

116. Alert 'Ukrainian Journalist Viktoriya Roshchyna Dies in Captivity in Russia' <https://go.coe.int/A0Mnh>

117. Alert 'Ukrainian Journalists Heorhiy Levchenko and Anastasiya Glukhovska Missing since Russian Detention' <https://go.coe.int/Nullg>

118. Maria Kuchapska, 'Hunted, Tortured, Killed. The Grim Fate of Journalists Under Russian Occupation', <https://united24media.com/anti-fake/hunted-tortured-killed-the-grim-fate-of-journalists-under-russian-occupation-3940>

119. Alert 'Citizen Journalist Yevhenii Ilchenko Detained, Tortured and Subjected to Forced Labour by Russian Occupying Forces', <https://go.coe.int/Y9uKo>

120. Alert 'Russian-Controlled Court in Crimea Detains Journalists Rustem Osmanov and Aziz Azizov on "Terror Charges"' <https://go.coe.int/bTYBX>

121. Alert 'Crimean Tatar Journalists Osman Arifmemetov, Remzi Bekirov and Rustem Sheikhaliev Detained by Russian Authorities' <https://go.coe.int/1GgoP>

122. Alert 'Ukrainska Pravda Reports "Systematic Pressure" from President's Office' <https://go.coe.int/hcG9K>

123. Alert 'Bihus.info Journalists Under Alleged Surveillance' <https://go.coe.int/57Cjs>

124. Alert 'Attempts to Raid the Home of Ukrainian Journalist Yuriy Nikolov' <https://go.coe.int/sA0yd>

125. Alert 'Attempted Intimidation on Slidstvo.info Journalist Yevhen Shulhat' <https://go.coe.int/fLBXN>

126. Alert 'Bill Criminalising Publication of "Confidential Information" from Public Databases Sparks Media Freedom Concerns', <https://go.coe.int/bnsKN>

# 2400 ARRESTATIONS LORS DE MANIFESTATIONS EN RUSSIE



'2,400 arrests during protests in Russia. - We're going to run out of prisons. - I'm arresting you for daring to doubt the regime.'

Urbs (France) / Cartooning for Peace

## Russian journalism: divided, exiled and suppressed

■ In 2024, Russian authorities have intensified their relentless crackdown on press freedom. They have implemented judicial and regulatory measures designed to intimidate independent journalists into abandoning their work and to further restrict Russian audiences' access to independent journalism through stringent regulatory bans.

■ At least six Russian journalists are currently behind bars on charges of disseminating 'fake news' or 'discrediting' the Russian army, while numerous journalists in exile were sentenced, in absentia, to prison sentences. Four journalists arrested in 2024 are on trial on extremism charges for cooperating with the late opposition leader Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK).<sup>127</sup>

■ Exiled Russian independent journalists are not safe either. In Prague, *iStories* journalists Irina Dolinina and Alesya Marokhovskaya<sup>128</sup> reported being followed by individuals allegedly linked to Russian intelligence, prompting Platform partners to call on Czech and European authorities for their protection. Meanwhile, dozens of journalists and media figures were newly designated as "foreign agents," further tightening restrictions on independent journalism. A ban introduced in March 2024 prohibits Russian companies from advertising with individuals or entities labelled as 'foreign agents,' severely impacting revenue streams for exiled journalists and media outlets.

■ Major independent outlets have been declared 'undesirable organisations',<sup>129</sup> effectively banning their operations in Russia. Sharing content from such outlets on social media entails administrative or criminal charges. These measures isolate Russia's independent media, cutting them off from domestic audiences and fostering an environment of repression and disinformation.

127. Alerts 'SotaVision Journalist Artem Kriger Arrested and Charged with 'Extremism'', <https://go.coe.int/8FI3B>; 'Forbes Journalist Sergey Mingazov under House Arrest, Freelancers Sergey Karelin and Konstantin Gabov Detained', <https://go.coe.int/NoCze>, 'SotaVision Journalist Antonina Favorskaya Arrested and Charged with "Extremism"', <https://go.coe.int/xBQ0A>

128. Alert 'iStories Journalists Alesya Marokhovskaya and Irina Dolinina Threatened and Surveilled in Prague', <https://go.coe.int/pdDaT>

129. Alert 'Freelance Reporter Anastasiya Zhvik Charged with Participating in "Undesirable Organisation"', <https://go.coe.int/zwT7H>

■ Russia has also escalated its targeting of international media. Since Ukrainian forces entered Russia's Kursk region in August 2024, at least 14 foreign journalists accompanying the Ukrainian army have faced criminal charges for alleged illegal border crossings.<sup>130</sup>

### **Viktoria Roshchyna, a life dedicated to journalism**

On 10 October 2024, Ukrainian and Russian authorities confirmed the death of Ukrainian journalist Viktoria Roshchyna.<sup>131</sup> The news sent shockwaves through Ukraine's media community and resonated deeply among journalists worldwide.

Born in 1996 in the eastern Ukrainian city of Zaporizhzhia, Roshchyna demonstrated a passion for journalism. She began covering local political affairs during her teenage years and later moved to Kyiv, where she freelanced for prominent publications such as *Ukrainska Pravda*, *Hromadske*, and RFE/RL.

Like many of her peers, Roshchyna felt compelled to report on Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine from its onset. She ventured into disputed territories in eastern Ukraine and, in March 2022, was imprisoned twice by Russian forces.<sup>132</sup> On the first occasion, she escaped captivity in Ukraine's Donetsk region by hiding overnight in a basement. On the second, she was detained in Berdyansk and released only after being coerced into recording a video in which she had to falsely claim that Russian forces had 'saved her life'.

In July 2023, Roshchyna embarked on another reporting mission. While the details of her plans remain unclear, she informed her family and editors that she intended to reach Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine. Unable to cross the front lines, she planned an alternative route, travelling through Poland and the Baltic states to access Russian-controlled areas via an entry point into Russia.

On 3 August 2023, Roshchyna informed her family that she had successfully crossed the border into Russia. After that, all contact ceased, and her whereabouts became unknown. For nearly a year, Russian authorities provided no information despite numerous inquiries from her family.

In April 2024, her father received confirmation from Russian authorities that Roshchyna was under arrest, though no further details were provided regarding the charges against her or the conditions of her detention. Independent media outlets, such as *Mediazona*, reported possible locations where she might have been held, but these could not be verified.

According to *Mediazona*, Roshchyna reportedly died while being transported from a high-security prison to Moscow. However, this information remains unconfirmed. Russian authorities have not disclosed any details regarding the circumstances of her death and have refused to return her body to her family. Ukraine has initiated an investigation into her death, but no similar steps have been taken by Russian authorities, who possess the necessary means to uncover the truth.

Partner organisations have called on Russia to immediately launch a full investigation into Roshchyna's death, publicly disclose the circumstances, prosecute those responsible, and return her remains to her family without delay. The lack of transparency and accountability surrounding Roshchyna's tragic fate underscores the urgent need for justice and press freedom in conflict zones.

130. Alert 'Criminal Probes Against Journalists Covering Ukraine Advance into Kursk' <https://go.coe.int/UCwxe>

131. Alert 'Ukrainian Journalist Viktoria Roshchyna Dies in Captivity in Russia' <https://go.coe.int/A0Mnh>

132. Alert 'Ukrainian Journalist Viktoria Roshchyna Missing in Occupied Territories' <https://go.coe.int/IjWIP>

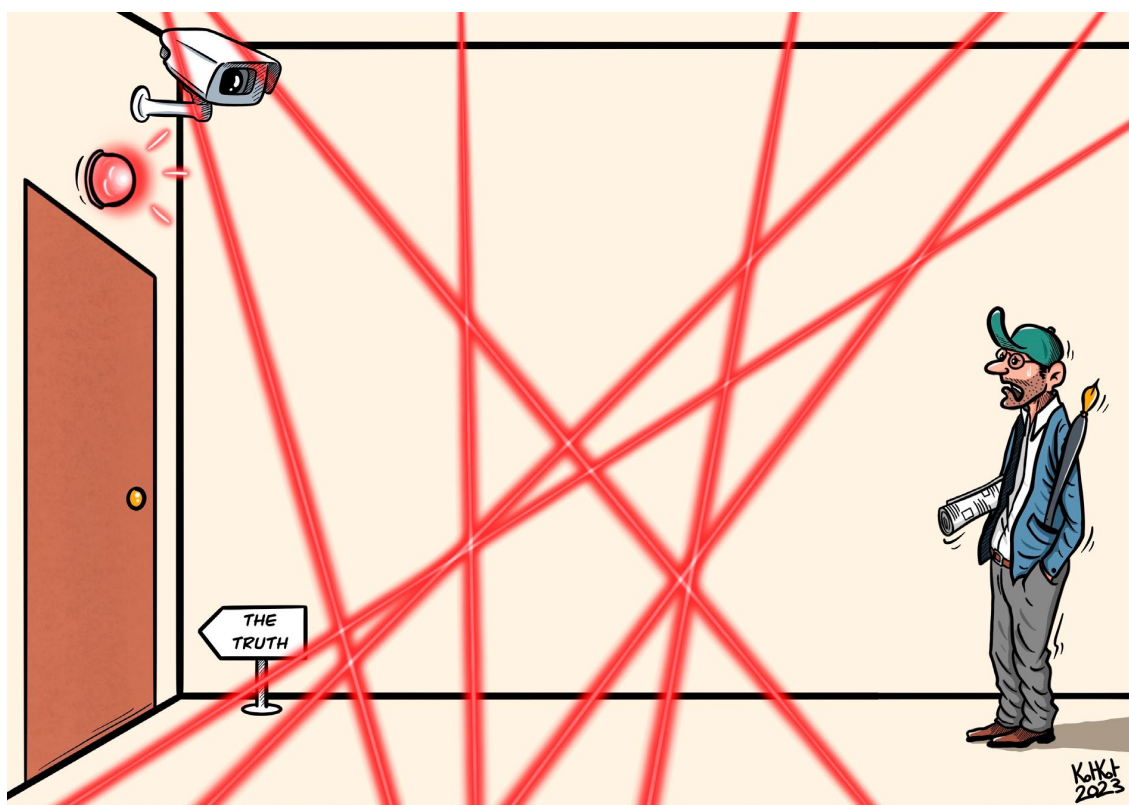


# Spyware and surveillance: escalating threats to journalism

**T**he surveillance of journalists using spyware has been a significant concern for Platform partners since the revelations of spyware scandals in Greece and Hungary in 2021 and 2022. In 2024, three major developments highlighted the continued risks posed by this technology.

■ The first was the revelation by the NGO *Access Now* and investigative partners that at least seven exiled Russian and Belarusian journalists had their phones infected with spyware.<sup>133</sup> This adds to the discovery in 2023 of spyware on the phone of Galina Timchenko, editor-in-chief of the independent Russian outlet *Meduza*.

■ The second development was the conclusion of Greece's investigation into the Predator-gate scandal, published in August by the Prosecutor of the Supreme Court. Press freedom advocates criticised the internal investigations in Greece, describing them as a whitewash that exonerated the security services. Meanwhile, journalists who were targeted or reported on the scandal faced police investigations and civil lawsuits.



Kotkot (Jordan) / Cartooning for Peace

133. Access Now, "Exiled, then spied on: Civil society in Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland targeted with Pegasus spyware", <https://www.accessnow.org/publication/civil-society-in-exile-pegasus/>



■ The third key development was the finalisation of the EMFA. The findings of the European Parliament's Committee of Inquiry into the abuse of spyware (PEGA), published in June 2023, shed light on the scale of the problem and generated political debate. However, PEGA's report also exposed the European institutions' limited capacity to effectively address spyware misuse and hold member states accountable.

■ The EMFA seeks to address some of these concerns. It requires member states to ban the use of surveillance and spyware against journalists except in narrowly defined circumstances, such as investigations of serious crimes. Surveillance must be authorised by a judicial or independent decision-making authority and subject to regular review. While these provisions establish EU-wide minimum standards, they fall short of the higher protections set by the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights. Ambiguities in the text leave room for derogations, including the invocation of national security to justify spying on journalists.<sup>134</sup> The law also fails to tackle the threat posed by the outsourcing of surveillance to private companies. Platform partners have committed to monitoring the law's application closely.

■ On 10 December 2024, 12 civil society organisations called on Poland, the incoming chair of the Council of the European Union (January - June 2025), to prioritise action against spyware misuse. Their recommendations included banning the operational use of commercial spyware by federal agencies, imposing sanctions on vendors, and enforcing visa restrictions.<sup>135</sup>

■ Advances in technology are making spyware infections harder to detect and far more widespread, as costs decrease, and applications expand. Without a global moratorium on the sale and use of spyware, these tools will increasingly fall into the hands of authoritarian governments and non-state actors, compromising the security of communications worldwide. This danger is not limited to authoritarian regimes; even democratic states have been implicated in abuses that compromise journalists' safety, privacy, and ability to work freely.

■ Press freedom organisations have called on governments to establish robust international regulations governing the use and trade of spyware. Safeguarding journalists' privacy and the confidentiality of their sources is not merely about protecting their individual rights—it is vital to the survival of investigative journalism. This, in turn, is crucial for maintaining the role of the press as a watchdog in democratic societies. Without decisive action, the unchecked spread of spyware threatens to erode one of the fundamental pillars of democracy: a free, independent, and fearless press.

### Barry McCaffrey and Trevor Birney: exposing collusion amidst state surveillance

In the summer of 2018 Belfast journalists Barry McCaffrey and Trevor Birney were arrested at dawn by armed police and their broadcast equipment and archives were confiscated. They learned later they had been under surveillance by three UK police forces over a decade. 'This isn't supposed to happen here,' McCaffrey said. 'It is supposed to happen in Russia or some South American junta.' *Operation Yurta*, as the police called the raid against the journalists, was set up to find the source that had leaked a top-secret document related to a sectarian massacre in Northern Ireland.

On 18 June 1994, in the village of Loughinisland, south of Belfast, members of the loyalist (Protestant) 'Ulster Volunteer Force' burst into a pub full of football fans enjoying the Republic of Ireland's performance at the World Cup. Firing assault rifles they killed six and wounded five. Despite official assurances that 'no stone would be left unturned' in pursuit of the killers, there were no prosecutions.

In 2017, using archive footage and contemporary interviews, *No Stone Unturned*, a documentary film by Alex Gibney, on which McCaffrey and Birney had worked, re-examined the Loughinisland massacre. Largely based on a leaked report of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland it named and filmed the alleged killers and explored a time when, as Trevor Birney writes in his book *Shooting Crows*, "there was a blurring of lines between the loyalist paramilitaries and the security forces". This case had similarities with the investigation into *Sunday World* journalist Martin O'Hagan, who was murdered on 28th September 2001 in Lurgan, Northern Ireland. Twenty-three years after his brutal murder, the killers of Martin O'Hagan have not been brought to justice. It has long been suspected that those who ordered his killing were paid police informants linked to the *Loyalist Volunteer Force* (LVF).<sup>136</sup>

134. "How far does Article 4 of the European Media Freedom Act go in banning state surveillance of journalists?", <https://cmpf.eui.eu/emfa-and-state-surveillance-of-journalists/>

135. "Civil Society Calls on the Polish Presidency to Lead the EU in Combating Spyware Abuse", <https://cdt.org/insights/civil-society-calls-on-the-polish-presidency-to-lead-the-eu-in-combating-spyware-abuse/>

136. Alert 'Impunity for Murder of Journalist Martin O'Hagan in 2001', <https://go.coe.int/l6RII>

Before the film's release, they shared their findings with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), expecting a fresh investigation, but the PSNI's instinct was not to hunt sectarian killers, but to track down the report's leaker. McCaffrey's communications were closely watched and in August 2018 armed officers stormed the journalists' homes at dawn. McCaffrey and Birney were then held for 12 hours.

Upon release, police hoped that the journalists would immediately phone their source, thereby exposing them. They were disappointed. McCaffrey maintains that he received the report anonymously. Thereafter the plan to catch the whistleblower unravelled spectacularly. An injunction granted by a judge shortly after the arrests prevented police from examining the confiscated computer devices and broadcast archives. Then, aided by the National Union of Journalists UK and Ireland, McCaffrey and Birney picked away at the legality of the search warrants that authorised their arrests. "That review was critical in uncovering the misuse of PSNI surveillance powers against journalists", said Séamus Dooley, NUJ assistant general secretary.<sup>137</sup>

In 2020 the Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland, Sir Declan Morgan quashed the warrants, rebuked the police and ordered that £875,000 (€1,030,000) be paid in compensation.

A subsequent Freedom of Information request revealed that McCaffrey's phone communications had been surveilled since 2013. Between 2008 and 2018, it transpired that he had been snooped upon at least five times. Resulting revelations proved even stronger: police in Northern Ireland had 230 times accessed journalists' telephone data and done the same to lawyers 500 times over 13 years. It was a reminder of the UK's controversial "snoopers' charter",<sup>138</sup> the 2016 *Investigatory Powers Act*, which grants law-enforcement authorities sweeping powers to surveil citizens and in particular journalists.

In June 2024, PSNI chief constable John Boucher announced an inquiry into the case by an independent barrister Angus McCullough KC. He will not, however, have the power to compel former police officers to give evidence.

To date, the journalists are the only persons to have been arrested in connection with the massacre. "The British State remains so concerned by the emergence of the real picture of systematic collusion and the role of the security forces in the deaths of so many victims that it introduced the *Legacy Act* in the spring of 2024 to shut down access to truth and justice",<sup>139</sup> concludes Trevor Birney in *Shooting Crows*.

On 17 December 2024, the Investigatory Powers Tribunal in London ruled that the PSNI, as well as the Metropolitan Police, unlawfully surveilled them to identify their sources. The ruling made British legal history as it was interpreted as endorsing the legal right of journalists to protect their sources and strengthening media protections against direct physical surveillance.

137. Alert 'Secret Inquiry into Alleged Surveillance of Journalists Trevor Birney and Barry McCaffrey', <https://go.coe.int/3JG4M>

138. Alert 'UK Draft Bill on Surveillance Threatens Protection of Journalists' Sources', <https://go.coe.int/bUv78>

139. Trevor Birney, *Shooting Crows*, p. 307.

# Protecting journalism: independence, fair conditions and labour rights

In a democratic society, it is vital that journalists operate independently of political, commercial, or corporate influences. This independence hinges on the existence of decent working conditions, robust protections against legal threats, editorial autonomy from media owners and political entities, and the freedom for journalists to organise within trade unions or professional associations.



O'Hanian (United States) / Cartooning for Peace

However, representative organisations are not always adequately consulted during major reforms that significantly affect media financing<sup>140</sup> and management.<sup>141</sup> Examples include the transformation of Slovak public television and the reform of the management of Spain's public broadcaster, *Radio Televisión Española* (RTVE).<sup>142</sup>

In some cases, coercive measures directly target these organisations. For instance, after being labelled an "extremist organisation" in 2023, the *Belarusian Association of Journalists* (BAJ) had its website domain deleted by Belarusian authorities on 3 January 2024.<sup>143</sup>

140. Alert 'Government Slashes Budgets at Slovak Public Broadcaster RTVS by 30%', <https://go.coe.int/ItlP6>

141. Alert 'Government Proposal Challenges Independence of Public Broadcaster RTVS', <https://go.coe.int/wTZM5>

142. Alert 'Draft Decree Risks Weakening the Independence of Public Broadcasting' <https://go.coe.int/bpXEU>

143. Alert 'More Than 20 News Websites Put Offline', <https://go.coe.int/Svn2x>

■ The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers *Recommendation CM/Rec(2016)4*<sup>144</sup> underscores the importance of labour and employment laws in protecting journalists from arbitrary dismissal, reprisals, and precarious working conditions that may subject them to undue pressures and ethical compromises. However, the *Media Pluralism Monitor* (MPM2024), a report by the European University Institute's Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, highlights institutional neglect in addressing precarious conditions.<sup>145</sup> For instance, in Italy, the primary collective contract for journalists (FIEG-FNSI) has remained expired since 2016, increasing journalists' vulnerability to political and commercial pressures. As noted in the Italian MPM2024 country report, "these circumstances heighten journalists' vulnerability to external influences such as commercial or political pressures, particularly in the absence of robust safeguards and certainty".<sup>146</sup>

*According to a survey, only four of the 35 European countries analysed - Denmark, Germany, Ireland, and Sweden - provide good working conditions for journalists.*

■ According to MPM2024, only four of the 35 European countries analysed - Denmark, Germany, Ireland, and Sweden - provide good working conditions for journalists. Conversely, Croatia, Montenegro, and Romania present particularly concerning labour conditions, where journalists without formal employee status often lack adequate social protections.

■ Local and regional journalists are especially disadvantaged, frequently receiving lower salaries and having limited or non-existent access to social security schemes. This trend is reflected across almost all Council of Europe member states and candidate countries, as highlighted in both the MPM2024 report and the *Local Media for Democracy* study.<sup>147</sup>

■ The report further highlights regional disparities in working conditions. In Central and Eastern European countries, particularly in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Serbia, local and regional journalists face disproportionately difficult circumstances compared to their counterparts in urban areas or at national outlets. Lower wages, insufficient resources, and minimal institutional support exacerbate these challenges, leaving many without the tools or protections necessary to fulfil their journalistic duties effectively.

■ MPM2024 also raises concerns about gender equality in the media sector. Female journalists are disproportionately affected by poor working conditions, often earning lower wages and facing limited career advancement opportunities. Additionally, they are more likely to experience harassment or threats, both online and offline, which further discourages participation in investigative or high-profile reporting. Addressing these systemic inequalities is essential for ensuring a diverse and inclusive media landscape.

■ Freelancers and young journalists are among the most vulnerable groups. The report notes that their reliance on short-term contracts or payment by article leaves them particularly exposed to exploitation and financial insecurity. In France, unions have criticised the 'uberisation' of the profession, with media outlets increasingly relying on short-term contracts, self-employment arrangements, payment through authors' rights, and internships.<sup>148</sup> This trend is reflected on the Safety of Journalists Platform, which recorded 28 alerts related to freelancers in 2024 alone.

■ According to MPM2024, the precariousness of journalistic work has indeed had a direct impact on the independence and quality of reporting across Europe. In countries with inadequate labour protections, journalists are often forced into self-employment or irregular contracts, leaving them without access to essential social protections such as healthcare, unemployment benefits, or retirement security. This instability further increases their vulnerability to external pressures, undermining their ability to report freely and ethically.

144. Recommendation CM/Rec(2016)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors <https://search.coe.int/cm?i=09000016806415d9>

145. "Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: application of the media pluralism monitor in the European member states and in candidate countries in 2023", <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/77028>

146. MPM2024 Italian country report: "Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: application of the media pluralism monitor in the European member states and in candidate countries in 2023. Country report: Italy", [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/77006/Italy\\_EN\\_mpm\\_2024\\_cmpf%20%282%29.pdf](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/77006/Italy_EN_mpm_2024_cmpf%20%282%29.pdf)

147. LM4D study "Uncovering news deserts in Europe - Risks and opportunities for local and community media in the EU", Verza & al., [https://cmpf.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/CMPF\\_Uncovering-news-deserts-in-Europe\\_LM4D-final-report.pdf](https://cmpf.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/CMPF_Uncovering-news-deserts-in-Europe_LM4D-final-report.pdf)

148. MPM2024: "Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: application of the media pluralism monitor in the European member states and in candidate countries in 2023. Country report: France", Jedediah Sklower & Alan Ouakrat, 2024, [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/77001/France\\_EN\\_mpm\\_2024\\_cmpf.pdf](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/77001/France_EN_mpm_2024_cmpf.pdf)



■ These findings underscore the urgent need for member states and European institutions to prioritise the establishment of robust labour protections for journalists. Strengthening these safeguards is not only critical for the welfare of media professionals but also essential for preserving press freedom and ensuring the public's access to independent, high-quality journalism.



Thiago (Brazil) / Cartooning for Peace

## Deep fake, real threats: the ordeal of Dinko Gruhonjić

*Dinko Gruhonjić is an associate professor in the Department of Media Studies at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad (Serbia), program director of the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina, and head of the Novinska Agencija Beta's Vojvodina bureau.*

Since March 2024, following the circulation of a deep fake video<sup>149</sup> falsely showing me expressing satisfaction with Ustasha war criminal Dinko Šakić, the commander of the Jasenovac concentration camp in Croatia during World War II, my life has been consumed by death threats.

The video's distribution on a pro-Russian Telegram channel triggered an avalanche of online harassment, escalating into a death threat delivered to my home, physical violence on the street, and relentless insults. As a journalist, academic, and programme director of the *Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (NDNV)*, I have always worked to inform the public on issues of human rights and the war legacy in the Western Balkans. However, my students are now being threatened, and the university faces immense pressure to dismiss me. Protests demanding my removal have even taken place. Adding to this ordeal, I am now facing two criminal charges based on this fabricated video.

In April, the Serbian far-right party Zavetnici filed the first charge, accusing me of 'spreading and inciting racial, religious, and national hatred and intolerance'. Soon after, other political groups, including the Serbian movement Dveri, the People's Party, and the 'I Live for Serbia' movement, filed similar complaints. High-ranking politicians, including Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, have weaponised the video to frame me as a political opponent, further endangering me and my family.

During this time, I have received thousands of chauvinistic insults and hundreds of death threats - not only directed at me but also targeting my family, including horrifying threats of rape against female relatives. For 15 days, I became the 'main story' on regime-controlled media, effectively the subject of a 'manhunt'. For the first time in my 35 years living in Novi Sad, strangers confronted and insulted me on the street, and I faced direct physical threats. Despite this, the Serbian police have provided no protection.

My colleagues have not been spared. Ana Lalić Hegediš, president of the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina and a journalist for the news portal *Nova.rs*, has also received death threats, simply for attending the Rebedu Festival in Dubrovnik. One of her attackers even escaped house arrest, intensifying the danger she faces. Although these threats were reported to the High-Tech Crimes Prosecutor's Office, little has been done. Thanks to the *Media Freedom Rapid Response* consortium, Ana and I received private security for four months. We also had to relocate from Serbia at different times for a total of one and a half months.

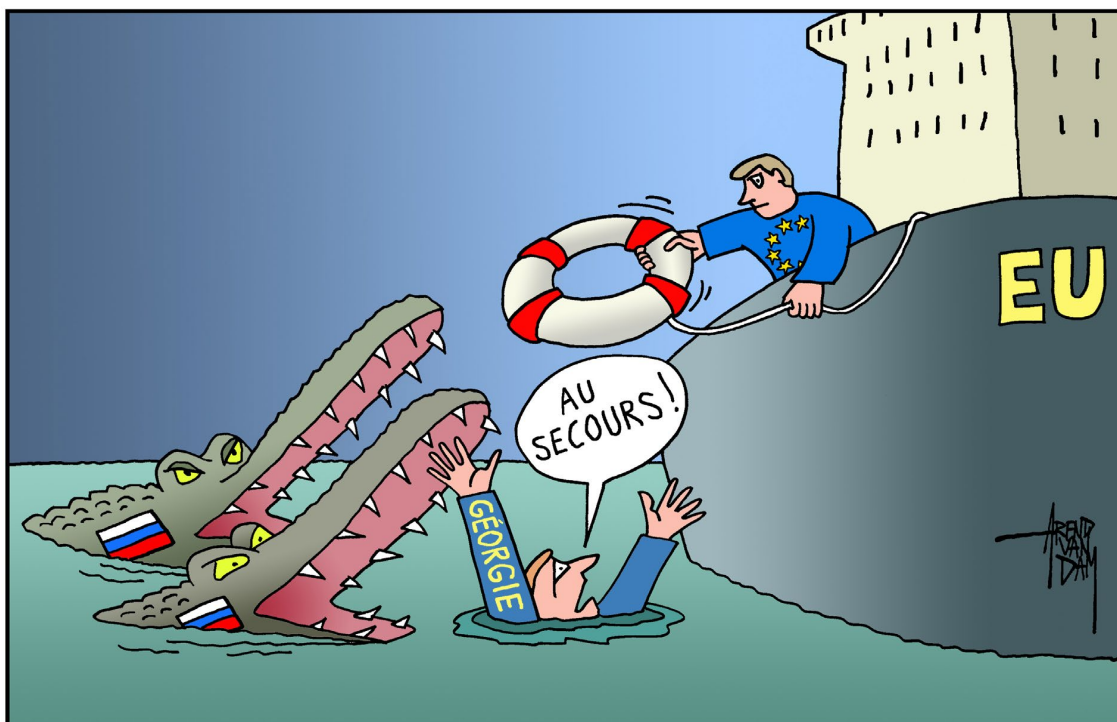
I have always been deeply committed to journalism, believing in its power to expose truth and promote justice. Yet, from a single deep fake video, the threats against me and my family have escalated far beyond the digital realm. I never imagined that my dedication to these principles would force me to fear for my life and the safety of my loved ones in my own country.

149. Alert 'Death Threats on Leaders of Vojvodina Association of Independent Journalists Ana Lalić Hegediš and Dinko Gruhonjić', <https://go.coe.int/QfYEi>

# Countries in focus

## Georgia: rapid decline of press freedom in 2024

■ In 2024, Georgia experienced the highest increase in press freedom alerts on the Platform among all member states of the Council of Europe, highlighting a rapid deterioration of media freedoms. This regression has distanced the country further from democratic principles and hindered its integration with the European Union.



Arend Van Dam (Netherlands) / Cartooning for Peace

■ A fact-finding mission conducted in October 2024 by partner organisations concluded that press freedom in Georgia is under severe strain amid rising authoritarianism.<sup>150</sup> The mission identified a range of tactics aimed at discrediting and suppressing dissenting voices, particularly those of independent journalists.

■ On 26 October, parliamentary elections were held following a tense and highly polarised campaign, marred by numerous accusations of fraud.<sup>151</sup> While the ruling Georgian Dream party declared victory, opposition parties, the President, domestic observers, and a significant portion of Georgian society contested the results. During the pre-election period, the Communications Commission fined several pro-opposition TV channels, including *Mtavari* TV, for refusing to air political advertisements, including propagandistic footage of war-torn Ukraine.

■ On election day, at least 70 journalists were subjected to verbal and physical assaults, intimidation, and obstruction of their work.

■ Following the elections, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced the suspension of Georgia's EU accession process until 2028, sparking nationwide pro-EU protests. Violence against journalists intensified during these demonstrations. In late November and early December, police used tear gas and water cannons to disperse protests, with more than 90 media workers reporting physical attacks, verbal abuse, or obstruction. Journalists'

150. Findings of the Press Freedom Mission to Georgia, <https://go.coe.int/ltkDn>

151. "Georgia at a crossroads: October 2024 parliamentary elections", Briefing 21-10-2024, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS\\_BRI\(2024\)762474](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2024)762474)



equipment was damaged, destroyed, or confiscated. Most affected journalists worked for independent and government-critical outlets. On 7 December, it was reported that *OC Media* co-founder Mariam Nikuradze was placed on a wanted list by Georgian authorities after covering nightly protests in Tbilisi.<sup>152</sup> On 12 December, press freedom groups jointly expressed concern over the violence deliberately targeting journalists in Tbilisi's streets.<sup>153</sup>

■ On 29 December, the Georgian Dream party inaugurated former football player Mikhail Kavelashvili as president, triggering further protests outside the Parliament in Tbilisi. These demonstrations continued into 2025, with calls for new elections and the release of detained protesters.

■ **Legislative restrictions and intimidation.** The Law 'On Transparency of Foreign Influence'<sup>154</sup> restricts freedom of expression and hinders the operation of independent media. The law mandates that organisations receiving more than 20% of their income from foreign sources register on a public 'Agents of Foreign Influence' list and submit detailed financial reports. Failure to comply results in hefty fines. The law applies to Georgian-language media, non-governmental organisations, and other entities, drawing heavy criticism for its similarity to Russia's punitive 2012 law on foreign agents. Journalists covering rallies against the law faced violence from riot police, smear campaigns, threats, and vandalism of their offices.

■ On 9 October 2024, the Constitutional Court admitted petitions challenging the law, including claims that it violates constitutional provisions on European integration. The Platform partners have urged Georgian authorities to withdraw the legislation entirely.

■ Another troubling development was the enactment of the '*Family Values and Protection of Minors*' law in December 2024. Modelled after Russia's 2013 anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, the law bans depictions of same-sex relationships in media, advertisements, and cultural works, and prohibits public events promoting non-traditional gender identities or relationships. The law poses a significant threat to freedom of expression and human rights.<sup>155</sup>

■ **Targeting journalists in exile.** Georgia, once considered a safe place for exiled journalists, has become increasingly perilous. Azerbaijani journalist Afgan Sadigov<sup>156</sup> was arrested in November 2024 and faces extradition to Azerbaijan.<sup>157</sup> Journalists are now denied entry into the country more frequently, with recent cases involving Czech journalist Ray Baseley,<sup>158</sup> Belarusian journalist Andrei Mialeshka, Armenian journalist Arsen Kharatyan,<sup>159</sup> and photojournalist Stephan Goss.<sup>160</sup>

■ Georgia's rapid decline in press freedom, marked by escalating violence against journalists, restrictive legislation, and political interference, underscores a troubling shift away from democratic principles and European integration. The government's increasing use of legal and physical intimidation tactics, coupled with legislative measures mimicking authoritarian models, has created a hostile environment for independent journalism. Urgent action is needed to reverse these trends, protect media freedoms, and uphold Georgia's commitments to democratic values and European aspirations.

## Italy: political meddling and legal threats to journalism

■ In Italy, although the number of alerts decreased in 2024 compared to the previous year, the situation is getting increasingly critical for journalists, public service media and independent media. The underlying issues identified in 2023, including the alerts about the independence of public television, are still unresolved. The authorities have yet to respond to the 2023 alerts regarding political appointments at RAI<sup>161</sup> and the cancellation of Roberto Saviano's show.<sup>162</sup>

152. OC-Media, "OC Media founder Mariam Nikuradze 'on police wanted list' ", <https://oc-media.org/oc-media-founder-mariam-nikuradze-on-police-wanted-list/>

153. "Urgent call on the European Union to react to the critical press freedom situation in Georgia", <https://www.rcmediafreedom.eu/News/Urgent-call-on-the-European-Union-to-react-to-the-critical-press-freedom-situation-in-Georgia>

154. Alert 'Bill Requires Internationally Funded Media to Register as "Foreign Agents"', <https://go.coe.int/LMSnq>

155. Alert 'Bill on Family Values to Ban "LGBT Propaganda" in the Media', <https://go.coe.int/H10i2>

156. Alert 'Azerbaijani Journalist Afgan Sadigov Detained at Request from Azerbaijan', <https://go.coe.int/jYHw4>

157. OC-Media, "Tbilisi Court rules in favour of extraditing jailed Azerbaijani journalist", <https://oc-media.org/tbilisi-court-rules-in-favour-of-extraditing-jailed-azerbaijani-journalist/>

158. Alert 'Czech Journalist Ray Baseley Barred from Entering Georgia', <https://go.coe.int/HovAO>

159. Alert 'Media Workers Andrei Mialeshka and Arsen Kharatyan Denied Entry to Georgia' <https://go.coe.int/n2jt8>

160. Update to the alert 'Czech Journalist Ray Baseley Barred from Entering Georgia' <https://go.coe.int/HovAO>

161. Alert 'Change in RAI Leadership and a Subsequent Cascade of Leadership Appointments Reveal the Government's Stranglehold on Public Broadcasting', <https://go.coe.int/JzQ5j>

162. Alert 'RAI Show Cancelled Following Request by Political Parties', <https://go.coe.int/bs83r>

■ In 2024, Italy was featured on the Council of Europe Platform through a systemic alert addressing its defamation legislation,<sup>163</sup> along with four alerts concerning physical attacks on journalists and three alerts related to harassment and intimidation.

■ Amidst a context of media freedom backsliding, the *Media Freedom Rapid Response* a network of six media freedom and journalists' organisations, conducted an urgent mission on 16-17 May 2024. Their report, published on 29 July 2024,<sup>164</sup> offers an analysis of the three most urgent issues identified:

- ▶ the unprecedented political interference in the public service broadcaster RAI;
- ▶ government members' legal harassment of dissenting journalists;
- ▶ the potential acquisition of AGI news agency by MP Antonio Angelucci, a member of Parliament of the far-right party Lega, who already controls several major newspapers.

■ The MPM2024 also highlights concerns over the independence of the public service media in Italy.<sup>165</sup> In its conclusions, the report refers to 'concerning signals regarding journalists' conditions and their susceptibility to pressures and threats. Pending reforms in criminal defamation laws and legal safeguards against SLAPPs contribute to this risk, aggravated by the rise in criminal and civil lawsuits against journalists, including by government officials. Economic instability and inadequate protections for younger media professionals exacerbate risks to journalists' safety, while debates over restrictions on judicial information access persist'.

■ The MPM2024 report underlines that the 2024 Budget Law reduced the television subscription fee for private use from €90 to €70, 'raising further questions about the adequacy of public funding and, consequently, the independence of RAI'.

■ On 7 November 2024, during a hearing organised by senator Barbara Floridia in the Italian Senate,<sup>166</sup> European Broadcasting Union's Director General Noel Curran denounced the insufficient funding of RAI: 'Public service media must receive adequate funding to fulfil their crucial democratic, economic, social and cultural roles', he said. 'RAI's funding increased by only 3% between 2019 and 2023, amid high inflation and rising production costs in Europe. And the Italian licence fee is currently one of the lowest ones in the EU. Only Greece and Portugal rank lower. Consequently, RAI's five-year funding growth has been significantly lower than the average 11% increase in nominal funding experienced by other European public service media'.

■ The combination of political influence over public broadcasting and the strategic use of defamation lawsuits poses a serious challenge to Italy's media freedom. Press freedom groups are calling for stronger protections to safeguard journalistic independence and prevent legal intimidation tactics from undermining critical reporting.

## **Slovakia: media freedom under fire**

■ 2024 has been a turbulent year for Slovakia's journalists as the government, installed since October 2023, moved to assert control over public media and threaten sanctions against journalists. This has occurred in a highly toxic atmosphere that has persisted since the shooting of Prime Minister Robert Fico on 15 May.

■ The future of public broadcasting has been at the forefront of the struggle for media independence since the start of the year. Parliament imposed a 30% cut in the budget of *Radio and Television Slovakia (RTVS)*,<sup>167</sup> reducing it from 0.17% of GDP in 2022 - when direct state funding replaced the licence fee - to 0.12% for 2024. The Ministry of Culture subsequently advanced plans to dissolve RTVS and replace it with *Slovak Television and Radio (STVR)*, a new entity established under a broadcasting law that came into force on 1 July. Despite warnings from media freedom groups<sup>168</sup> that the law would allow the government to take control of public media, and expressions of concern by Věra Jourová, then Vice-President of the European Commission, the law was passed. This change enabled the government to remove the RTVS Director and senior management, replacing them with political allies.

163. Alert 'Defamation Legislation Fails to Adequately Protect Media Freedom', <https://go.coe.int/0hvqk>

164. MFRR Mission Report: 'Silencing the Fourth Estate: Italy's Democratic Drift', <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2024/07/29/mission-report-silencing-the-fourth-estate-italys-democratic-drift/>

165. MPM2024 report, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/77028>

166. Intervention at the Italian Senate: 'Le sfide del servizio pubblico: convegno in Sala Zuccari', <https://www.senato.it/attualita/archivio-notizie?nid=92650>

167. Alert 'Government Slashes Budgets at Slovak Public Broadcaster RTVS by 30%', <https://go.coe.int/ltIP6>

168. International Press Institute, 'Call for withdrawal of Slovakia's repressive broadcast law', <https://ipi.media/slovakias-repressive-broadcast-law-call-for-withdrawal/>

■ Tensions have been rising for months, with leading politicians accusing independent media of publishing lies and regularly threatening action against them. Following the Prime Minister's shooting, several politicians, including Slovak National Party leader Andrej Danko, blamed the media and incited a wave of threats against journalists.<sup>169</sup> Danko claimed the media had "blood on their hands." Despite a parliamentary motion calling for calm, tensions remain high, with numerous journalists reporting fears of being publicly identified and at increased risk. Prime Minister Fico exacerbated these fears, labelling the media "bloodthirsty bastards" and threatening to establish a new Media Office to oversee journalists' work.<sup>170</sup>

■ The atmosphere of fear is heightened by the ongoing failure to prosecute the mastermind behind the murders of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová. This is compounded by the government's disbandment of the Special Prosecutor's Office, which had been responsible for pursuing those accountable for the crime.<sup>171</sup>

■ In September 2024, Prime Minister Fico filed a lawsuit against Peter Bárty,<sup>172</sup> editor-in-chief of *Aktuality.sk*, and its publishing house, demanding €200,000 (€100,000 from each) over the use of his photograph in the book *Fico: Obsessed with Power*. While SLAPP cases have been relatively rare in Slovakia, this lawsuit underscores the urgent need for the government to introduce robust anti-SLAPP legislation and refrain from using such abusive legal measures.

■ The government has also proposed restructuring the Media Services Council, which regulates the media. The plan includes downgrading the board's role and introducing a one-person statutory body, appointed by the government, to make decisions. The proposal,<sup>173</sup> justified as part of the EMFA reforms, would expand government control over the regulator, directly contradicting the core principles of EMFA.

■ Media pluralism came under threat when the government-aligned Penta investment group expanded its media holdings by acquiring the leading daily *Nový Čas*. This purchase granted Penta near-monopoly control over the tabloid market, while independent media outlets continue to struggle with declining advertising revenue and barriers to accreditation. Allegations of political pressure on the leading private news broadcaster *Markíza TV* triggered staff protests against perceived attempts to undermine editorial independence.

■ The government has also openly shunned independent media, refusing interviews, ignoring questions, and denying information requests, while engaging with "alternative" outlets widely regarded as disseminators of disinformation. This approach obstructs journalists from performing their work, undermines the public's right to information, and weakens government accountability.

■ Slovakia continues to host a strong and resilient independent media sector despite ongoing challenges. However, rather than fostering a safe and enabling environment that allows journalists to operate freely, the Slovak government's actions have increasingly undermined media independence. This situation presents a serious challenge to the EU's commitment to protecting media freedoms and upholding democratic values.

169. "Slovakia: Cease attacks on journalists and satirists amid growing tensions", <https://www.article19.org/resources/slovakia-cease-attacks-on-journalists-satirists-growing-tensions/>

170. Alert 'Prime Minister Verbally Attacks and Threatens Journalists at Press Conference', <https://go.coe.int/Ue2TB>

171. MFRR Statement, "Lack of justice for Kuciak and Kušnírová's assassination exacerbated by growing attacks on press freedom", <https://ipi.media/slovakia-lack-of-justice-for-kuciak-and-kusnirovas-assassination-exacerbated-by-growing-attacks-on-press-freedom/>

172. Alert 'Prime Minister Sues Aktuality.sk Editor-in-Chief and Publisher Over Use of a Picture', <https://go.coe.int/h2eNC>

173. Draft Act amending Act No. 264/2022 Coll. on Media Services and on Amendments and Additions to Certain Acts (Act on Media Services), as amended, <https://www.slov-lex.sk/elegislativa/legislativne-procesy/SK/PI/2024/296>



*Donnelly (United States) / Cartooning for Peace*

# Institutional sections

## Council of Europe: strengthening engagement at the national level

■ On 18 September 2024, Alain Berset, a Swiss national and former President of the Confederation, assumed the position of Secretary General of the Council of Europe for a five-year mandate.<sup>174</sup> Earlier in the year, Michael O’Flaherty from Ireland was elected as the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, commencing a six-year term on 1 April.<sup>175</sup>

■ The Council of Europe devoted close attention and invested serious resources throughout the year to the “*Journalists Matter*” campaign which aims to generate awareness with governments, citizens and journalists on the role that upholding the safety of journalists has in defending democracy, and seek the enforcement of positive obligations, including action plans.

■ However, at the time of writing, some member states had yet to establish focal points or provide sufficient information, reflecting slow responses or a lack of commitment to the campaign’s objectives. Other states have shared information on pre-existing measures to protect journalists, implemented before the campaign’s launch.

■ **Increased cooperation.** Two meetings with Platform partners were held during the year - one with the Secretariat and another with focal points - emphasising the need for greater coordinated engagement to achieve strong results during the second year of the campaign, which focuses on the Prosecution pillar. Strengthening nationally led initiatives would greatly benefit the campaign. Platform partners could track and support these efforts through reporting and advocacy, while collaboration with European Union and OSCE staff working on journalist safety initiatives could also be enhanced.

■ Critical assessments of measures and plans proposed by focal points or existing national structures remain essential. These assessments should aim to align national frameworks with the Council of Europe’s *Journalist Safety Recommendation (2016)* and its implementation guide. Additionally, evaluating the trust of local journalists in national focal points and committees would provide valuable insights into the campaign’s effectiveness and long-term goals.

■ A thematic conference on improving member states’ compliance with norms and standards related to investigating and prosecuting crimes against journalists will take place in Luxembourg in 2025. The event will also serve as a platform for a third meeting of the national focal points.

■ **Recognition and support for the Platform.** Platform partners continued to engage with the ‘*Group of Friends of the Council of Europe on the Safety of Journalists and Media Freedom in Strasbourg*’.

■ On 2 November, to mark the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists, the group issued a statement recognising the Platform as ‘an essential tool for the prevention and redress of serious threats and violence against journalists’. The statement called on member states to ‘take the Platform’s alerts seriously and provide substantive answers within the given timeframe... [and to] use the Platform’s alerts as a practical tool to identify and address areas of concern.’<sup>176</sup>

■ **An ambitious anti-SLAPP recommendation.** On 5 April, the Committee of Ministers approved the Council of Europe’s Recommendation on SLAPPs. This non-binding text was welcomed by civil society for its broad and ambitious measures, which, if effectively implemented, could significantly reduce the harm caused by vexatious lawsuits targeting journalists across the region. The Recommendation provides clearer indicators of what constitutes a SLAPP, stronger language on compensation for damages, and language on early dismissal mechanisms.

■ The Recommendation was developed with input from Platform partners and civil society, alongside the Committee of Experts on SLAPPs. As a legally non-binding text, it entails less political commitment than the EU’s anti-SLAPP Directive, however it offers more ambitious provisions. Press freedom advocates have urged EU member states to also integrate the Recommendation’s robust measures into their transposition of the Directive.

174. “Alain Berset elected Secretary General of the Council of Europe”, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/alain-beret-elected-secretary-general-of-the-council-of-europe>

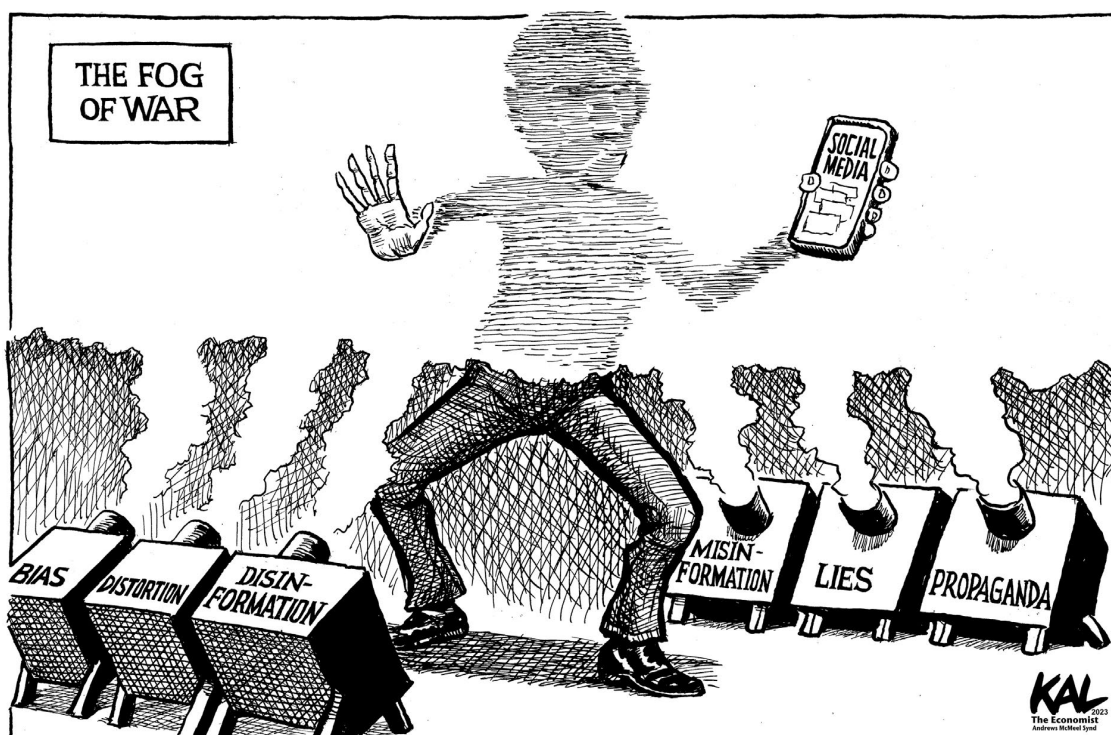
175. “Michael O’Flaherty elected Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights”, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/michael-o-flaherty-elected-council-of-europe-commissioner-for-human-rights>

176. Joint statement by the Group of Friends of the Council of Europe on the Safety of Journalists and Media Freedom, <https://go.coe.int/Xazgo>



■ **Advancing coordination within the Council of Europe.** At the start of 2023 the *Steering Committee on Media and Information Society (CDMSI)*, was transferred from the Directorate General Human Rights and the Rule of Law to the Directorate General of Democracy and Human Dignity to facilitate more effective internal coordination. Platform partners expressed their readiness to contribute actively to effective planning and coordination between themselves and the CDMSI, including around the “*Journalists Matter*” campaign.

■ **Artificial intelligence.** On 17 May 2024, the Committee of Ministers adopted the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law. The Convention establishes a legal framework to address the ethical, human rights, and legal challenges posed by AI, with a focus on safeguarding democratic accountability and the rule of law in the Council of Europe region. The Convention calls for AI systems to respect freedom of expression and avoid harmful impacts on data protection or surveillance.



Kal (United States) / Cartooning for Peace

## European Union: implementing press freedom reforms

■ The 2024 European elections, held from 6 to 9 June, resulted in increased support for populist political groups across Europe, marking a political shift to the right within the European Parliament. This development created an increasingly fragmented political climate in Brussels, raising uncertainties about the EU’s future capacity to counter the impact of populist politics on European democratic life.

■ Ursula von der Leyen, who had committed to press freedom during her previous tenure, was re-elected as European Commission President until 2029. In her new Commission, von der Leyen nominated Michael McGrath of Ireland as Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, and the Rule of Law, and Finland’s Henna Virkkunen as Executive Vice-President for Tech Sovereignty, Security, and Democracy.

■ In their mission letters, both were given important portfolios to continue to oversee and develop the EU’s existing measures - opened up by previous Vice-President for Values and Transparency, Věra Jourová - to improve media freedom and address problems faced by journalists.<sup>177</sup> Both were put in charge of monitoring the successful implementation of EMFA, an important EU Regulation aimed at safeguarding media pluralism, independence,

177. Commissioners-designate (2024-2029), [https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/towards-new-commission-2024-2029/commissioners-designate-2024-2029\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/towards-new-commission-2024-2029/commissioners-designate-2024-2029_en)

and freedom across member states. McGrath was also given additional responsibilities, including building on the work of the European Commission's 2021 Journalist Safety Recommendation; overseeing the implementation of the European Commission's 2022 anti-SLAPP Act, a (legally binding) Directive and a (soft law) Recommendation; and strengthening the European Commission's Rule of Law report, including developing the links between the recommendations of the Rule of Law report and fund conditionality. Both will also oversee a 'European Democracy Shield', which will in part seek to counter foreign information manipulation and interference. Platform partners encourage the new Commission to consider further actions in the "European Democracy Shield" to safeguard a free, pluralistic and independent press as an antidote to tackling foreign manipulation. In their hearings in Parliament, McGrath and Virkunnen issued statements in strong support of their new responsibilities.

■ **EU Reforms.** EMFA, a landmark EU Regulation, entered into force in May 2024, with member states required to apply its provisions fully by August 2025.

■ The Act aims to address issues such as media concentration, political interference, surveillance, threats to public service media, and the economic challenges faced by journalists. While supporters of the legislation are strategising on how to monitor its implementation, concerns remain about its enforcement, particularly in member states with deeply entrenched media capture or systemic rule of law deficiencies. There are fears that some governments may attempt to circumvent its provisions. These concerns now place increased pressure on the European Commission to closely monitor the Act's enforcement, to consider the application of the Act within the scope of the rule of law report, and the enforcement of the European Commissions' rule of law toolbox which includes possible infringement proceedings.

■ On 10 July, Hungary filed a case to the European Court of Justice challenging the European Media Freedom Act. The challenge was under review at the time of writing.

■ The Anti-SLAPP Directive also entered into force in May 2024, with a transposition deadline of May 2026. Civil society groups have urged member states to adopt robust legislative and non-legislative measures, by also integrating provisions from related non-binding texts, such as the 2022 European Commission anti-SLAPP Recommendation and the Council of Europe's 2024 anti-SLAPP Recommendation.

■ The Directive, which covers cross-border civil cases, should provide varying degrees of legal protection for journalists, and has been symbolic in terms of making the issue a political priority for the EU, drawing member states' scrutiny of their actions at national level. As an EU Directive though, EU member states' transposition of the Directive, a process by which they devise their own laws to meet the legal text's aims, could lead to it being applied inconsistently across the bloc. However, it is set to be tracked rigorously by the CASE Coalition. The success of the Directive will equally depend on the judicial interpretation of the subsequent national legislative measures put in place by member states and the ability of judicial systems to challenge powerful political and economic individuals or entities seeking to silence journalists and in often problematic or weakened rule of law contexts.

■ On 3 May, the European Commission published the *Study on Putting in Practice by Member States of the Recommendation on the Protection, Safety and Empowerment of Journalists*, which assessed how EU member states have implemented Recommendation 2021/1534 on the protection, safety, and empowerment of journalists. The Recommendation had put forward actions for member states, including ensuring effective investigation and prosecution of criminal acts against journalists; improving protection of journalists at protests or demonstrations; training for journalists and law enforcement bodies; as well as strengthening the online security of journalists and empowering female or minority journalists and those working on equality issues. The study mapped out initiatives identified in EU member states aimed at implementing or contributing to the Recommendation and made additional recommendations, including proposing a monitoring system. It noted an increasing number of initiatives around EU member states but stated that the pace of establishment was slow. It concluded that systems to ensure journalists' safety were "complex and fragmented" and varied across member states. It cited numerous challenges in developing a monitoring system dedicated to this Recommendation; a lack of specific measures adopted at national level to ensure investigation and prosecution of crimes specifically targeting journalists; a lack of structured approaches for rapid response; and a lack of cooperation mechanisms dedicated to journalists' online safety. The study provided a good overall assessment of steps taken but was not accompanied by a clear strategy for follow up from the European Commission.

■ Furthermore, it often provided information as communicated by the member states and arguably did not fully reflect critical assessments of such measures that journalists and press freedom activists working on the ground could have provided. During his hearing in November, then Commissioner-designate Michael McGrath stated that he would examine re-opening the Journalist Safety Recommendation to take up previously unaddressed areas and find ways to strengthen its implementation.



■ The Digital Services Act continued to be implemented, with major platforms and search engines submitting risk assessment reports in December 2024. However, questions remain about the effectiveness of proposed mitigation measures to protect journalists from online threats.

■ **Rule of law and press freedom.** The European Commission published its fifth annual Rule of Law Report in July 2024, the last report of the previous Commission's tenure. Civil society groups have praised its openness to recommendations but stressed the need for more specific and actionable benchmarks to track progress. During its tenure, the European Commission started to publish the calendar of country visits and include recommendations for each country chapter.

■ The new Commission will now need to address other ongoing concerns that remain unaddressed, including the lack of specific and detailed recommendations that should serve as benchmarks for tracking state obligations and improving coordination with civil society throughout the reporting cycle. The new Commission will be tested on whether these reports translate into tangible improvements for press freedom.

■ **Ongoing Challenges.** Member states remained divided on the proposed Child Sexual Abuse Regulation, which would require online platforms to scan user content and metadata for harmful material. Critics warn this could jeopardise journalists' ability to protect sources and compromise the right to confidential communications.

■ The EU has also struggled to effectively challenge spyware abuse against journalists. The European Media Freedom Act did introduce provisions to safeguard journalists against surveillance and harassment which should, in principle, give individuals the channels to report abuse and request remedy. Recommendations made by the European Parliament to member states, as part of the PEGA Committee of Inquiry report published in June 2023, were not followed up on. The report by parliamentarians had examined the use of spyware in EU member states, called for investigations and subsequent reform of national security practices.

■ Finally, the European Court of Justice continued to hear the New York Times' case against the European Commission over its failure to disclose text messages between Commission President von der Leyen and Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla about COVID-19 vaccine contracts. In April 2021, The New York Times reported that they had faced problems accessing the texts, which the Commission stated it could not provide.

Visit the Platform website:

<https://fom.coe.int>

A decade ago, on 2 April 2015, the Platform to Promote the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists was launched with the support of all Council of Europe member states to enhance the protection of journalists and other media actors, prevent attacks against them, and end impunity for such crimes. At the launch, the then Secretary General stated: 'The Platform shall enable the Council of Europe bodies and institutions to be alerted on time, in a more systematic way, and to take timely and coordinated action when necessary.'

Today, 15 international press freedom and freedom of expression organisations actively partner with the Council of Europe to advance these objectives through dialogue, cooperation, and engagement with state authorities and civil society organisations. The Platform stands out as the world's first continent-wide early warning system, documenting and addressing serious threats to media freedom wherever they arise. It plays a crucial role in advocating for concrete remedies and fostering accountability, ensuring the protection and promotion of press freedom across the region.

The Platform operates with the financial support of Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

**safety of  
journalists  
platform**

