

May 3 - International Press Freedom Day

European Media Freedom and Democracy at a Crucial Crossroad

On 3 May 2024 the world journalist community marks for 31st time the International Day for Press Freedom. When it was proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in 1993 this was marked by the prevailing at the time optimism that the fall of communism opens new horizons for democratic transformation of the world. It promised a bright future for free speech and press freedom as the basis of democracy in any society. This day was meant to remind world governments that they need to respect their commitment to press freedom which is a driver for all other human rights.

31 years later however we are witnessing a deeply worrying trend. The International Federation of Journalists warned: *“From Peru to Iran, from Sudan to Afghanistan, governments are taking drastic measures to impede freedom of expression and prevent the public’s right to know, including internet restrictions, beating, jailing and intimidating journalists, controlling media content and introducing drastic media laws and other laws to curb the free flow of information.”*

What is most worrying for us as European Journalists is that the sustainability of free media is threatened even in many European Union countries. Free speech and press freedom are under severe pressure. The European information landscape is dominated by [the big online platforms](#) which have grown into huge information monopolies, most of them American. The media space is [poisoned](#) by growing misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy campaigns, threatening Europe’s democracies and European integration more broadly. Pluralism is lacking. Journalists’ protection of sources is meanwhile under attack by increased state surveillance.

Media are increasingly captured and controlled by politicians—or subjected to ‘fake news’ smears in the style of former United States president Donald Trump. Threats to United Europe, obviously, come not only from the East!

Journalism and journalists are captives to oligarchic structures, to the filter bubbles generated by Google search engines and the stereotypes of AI. Journalists are subjected to political attacks and threats with impunity from many sides, limiting their independence. They are also victims to precarious working and financial conditions, leading to a brain drain from the industry. This could have a devastating impact on the quality of journalism and media pluralism. **All this is accelerating the shrinkage of the space for independent and public-interest journalism, especially in the unprecedented circumstances of the most cruel war raging on our continent in nearly 80 years.**

The Russian aggression in Ukraine is imposing unprecedented censorship in the media sphere all over Europe, not only in the warring countries. Moderate and reasonable voices are being silenced which is one of the biggest obstacles to stopping the carnage and to the diplomatic efforts for a peaceful solution and the elimination of the risk of an apocalyptic Third World War.

It is extremely important that we all come together to support journalism and journalists in their uphill struggle for independence, free speech and pluralism. If we fail to do that there will be no democracy, there will be no one to keep the ruling powers accountable.

On March 26 this year the European Union adopted the final text of the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) after nearly two years of vigorous discussions between EU institutions, politicians, experts and media and human rights organizations from all EU countries. This is the most crucial legislation in the media sphere to which all European governments - except Hungary - gave the final green light. The initiative of the European Commission could not be more timely as the situation is worsening in several EU countries, where public service media are being used politically and weakened financially, instead of guaranteeing citizens independent, pluralistic and quality information as their mission requires.

Here are some of the latest examples of those vicious attacks against free media. The most recent example is Slovakia, where a draft law in discussion foresees the dissolution of Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS) to replace it with the new Slovak Television and Radio (STaR). Drastic changes to the appointment and competence of oversight bodies would set up government control and effectively end the public broadcaster's independence, contradicting Article 5 of the EU's Media Freedom Act. In Italy, recent major politically-influenced internal management changes at Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI) and attempts to shrink even further the financial autonomy of the Italian broadcasting service are another worrying development that the EMFA should prevent.

The absurd situations in Slovakia and Italy highlight the importance of immediate and ambitious implementation of the EMFA, which is not only aimed at preventing political interference, but also at preventing the weakening of public service media due to a lack of financial sustainability. This landmark European media legislation is not the best possible one, it has its shortcomings, but it establishes minimum rules for the protection of journalists' sources, strict guarantees for the independent operation of public service media and their financial viability, transparency in media ownership and state advertising, as well as editorial independence in newsrooms. It is a positive step to prevent threats to media plurality and independence from market concentration. It also provides better protection of online content produced by news media and journalists from the power of the platforms, as well as from undue political or other interference.

We should also join the group of 39 civil society, human rights, journalist and media support organisations who signed a petition calling on the European Commission to strengthen the effectiveness of the rule of law dialogue, improve the impact of reporting and take decisive action against systematic human rights violations in the EU Member States. This group in fact marks the creation of a broad alliance of civil society – readers and listeners, journalists' organisations and associations, academics, and media freedom NGOs – to stand up for journalism and convince employers and decision makers that the protection of journalists and journalism is essential to democracy.