

1397th Meeting of the Committee of Ministers (3 March 2021)

EU Statement on the safety of journalists, freedom of expression and freedom of media

1. The European Union reaffirms its strong commitment to media freedom and freedom of expression, both online and offline, as well as to the safety of journalists, a prerequisite of these freedoms, which constitute one of the essential foundations of a democratic society and provide the transparency and accountability necessary to build public trust, including while fighting the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. The EU sees with great concern that despite the fundamental role played by journalists and media workers, there has been a significant surge in serious threats to them, which include attacks on their physical safety and integrity, detention and imprisonment, harassment and intimidation, for which those responsible are not being held accountable. We are also alarmed by the fact that women journalists suffer from targeted gender-based violence.
3. The EU is concerned about this alarming trend, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which is used by some countries to justify disproportionate restrictions to the right to freedom of expression online and offline and to impede journalists and media workers from reporting, including on pandemic-related issues. The ongoing public health crisis must not be used to silence journalists or hinder their work. Fighting disinformation around the pandemic remains important, but can only succeed if built on the conscientious work of committed and courageous journalists. In this context, we call for the freedom of expression and freedom of the media as guaranteed by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights to be respected. There should be no impunity for crimes committed against journalists and media workers.
4. The EU continues to follow the situation for media freedom and freedom of expression in Turkey with concern because of the serious backsliding in these areas. We condemn the continuing restrictions, detentions, imprisonments, and other measures targeting journalists, and call on Turkey to urgently and effectively address these negative developments. Media pluralism must be protected.
5. The EU is also concerned and condemns the harassment and prosecution of Turkish Cypriot journalists in the areas where the Government of the Republic of Cyprus does not exercise effective control.

6. The EU is also concerned about the worsening situation for the rights to freedom of expression, opinion and information and for media freedom in Russia. During the recent widespread demonstrations across Russia, journalists were harassed, mistreated and around 150 journalists were detained. Recent reinforced restrictive legislation including the amendments to the “foreign agents” law, have curbed freedom of expression in Russia and confirms a negative pattern of shrinking space for independent civil society. The amendments signed into Russia’s constitution also raise serious concerns and must not be used to justify possible non-implementation of Russia’s international law commitments.
7. The EU is engaged in providing support and legal assistance to journalists and media workers under threat, to support quality journalism, cross-border cooperation between media professionals and reinforcement of self-regulatory bodies. In the troubling context of the pandemic, the EU has stepped up its action for the safety of journalists. We have placed this issue at the centre of our Human Rights and Democracy Action Plans, we have worked with EU Delegations to reinforce their action in this field and we have launched dedicated programmes across continents.
8. The EU very much values the work undertaken in the Council of Europe which has made the safety of journalists one of its priorities. We support the appeals by the Council of Europe Secretary General and the Commissioner for Human Rights for a free, independent and safe press. In this regard, we reiterate our support to the Platform for the protection of journalism and safety of journalists, which offers an important venue to promote discussion on the current challenges in this field and to signal specific cases of restrictive legislation and attacks against journalists.
9. The EU calls on the Council of Europe to continue promoting the fight against information manipulation and defending the free exercise of their work for journalists and media workers, and the free access to independent and reliable information for all. The EU encourages member States of the Council of Europe to support and co-operate with the Council of Europe on this issue.
10. The EU supports the many intergovernmental and non-governmental initiatives operating for the reinforcement of media freedom and of journalists’ security. Closer coordination among these initiatives is essential for a more effective action at global and local level.