

WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY

An explainer

Introduction

Marked on 3rd May every year, World Press Freedom Day draws attention to our right to freedom of expression as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

However, press freedom around the world has been deteriorating for years, with censorship and threats against journalists on the rise. The number of imprisoned journalists as well as those killed for doing their jobs has also been growing. Meanwhile, independent journalism is becoming increasingly scarce, under-resourced and expensive - even though the internet has helped to democratise our access to information.

The situation is serious, a global response is necessary.

A good example is the current Covid-19 pandemic, where journalism is needed more than ever but governments around the world are using the crisis as a convenient excuse to stifle criticism and keep the media in check.

What about Europe?

For many, the EU might seem to be a champion of press freedom. However, there are reasons to doubt this.

In Hungary, for example, since Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party came to power in 2010, they have gradually brought the country's media to heel.



They have been using the pandemic as an opportunity to muzzle opposition voices with a new law that punishes what the Orbán regime regards as “fake news”, or risk five years in prison. Furthermore, the new law allows the government to exert direct control over journalists who do not provide information in an approved manner and threatens to make survival impossible for independent media - the last bastions of citizens’ right to information. No wonder then in the latest world press freedom index, Hungary fell two more places to 89th out of 180 countries.

Much like Hungary, Poland has in recent years turned state-owned media into government mouthpieces to spread propaganda. However, the ruling Law & Justice Party (PiS) has gone even further. According to the government in Warsaw, journalism depends on public trust and should therefore be regulated in a similar way to the health sector. In a country which already has one of the most restrictive laws on abortion in the EU, the far-right Polish government of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) is trying to outlaw abortion in cases of foetal malformation, which accounts for 90% of cases in Poland. After the law passed, a legal opinion was leaked proposing that anyone releasing information about clinics or pills should be sued for promoting abortion.

Killed for their courage

Elsewhere in the EU, a number of tragic examples in recent years have blighted the bloc’s image on press freedom.

On 16th October 2017, Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, famous for her investigation into corruption related to the Panama Papers revelations, was murdered by a car bomb. Two and a half years on, her family is still awaiting real justice. This tragedy shed light on the systemic shortcomings in Malta’s press freedom and democratic control.

Similarly in Slovakia, the mafia assassinated investigative journalist Jan Kuciak, in February 2018 for his work on the tax dodging practices of several businessmen with connections to powerful politicians. He was the first journalist murdered in Slovakia since the country’s independence.

#WPF2020: A day to celebrate & remember

World Press Freedom Day is about more than just protecting press freedom. It’s about remembering all those who died in search of the truth, standing up for our right to information, our right to know.

Today, as we celebrate freedom of the press and freedom of expression, let us pay tribute to the people and organisations that protect and promote the essence of democracy: truth.