

World Press Freedom Day 2019

EJ Statement

Media freedom all over the world today is threatened like never before in the last decades. We thought that democracy is gaining ground in more and more countries and regions but there are ever more disturbing facts coming from places long considered to be the pillars of democracy.

Press freedom is threatened by restrictive media laws and rules in many countries which put the power over editorial content into the hands of censors and courts or by violence of all kinds, cyber-bullying and internet shutdowns, by a growing concentration of media ownership, lack of transparency about media financial sources, and a media environment in which ethical concerns and quality journalism are sacrificed for profit or political advantage. We can see this happening even in some EU countries and the US.

There can be no democracy without freedom of the press. The media's role is to guarantee access to free and pluralistic information, independent from political and economic powers. This is particularly true in times of elections when the stakes are so important. Today, however, citizens' trust in media discourses is eroding dangerously. Media face a series of challenges which, in the long-term, could undermine their role as a cornerstone of democracy.

Marking this year's World Press Freedom Day, we have to speak out and share a common concern over the worldwide increase in attacks on freedom of the press. Most of these attacks take aim at internet and other networking technologies which have provided people everywhere in the world with a new platform for exercising their right to freedom of opinion and expression. Some governments are increasingly resorting to a variety of measures to restrict such freedoms, contrary to their commitments and to international human rights law. We saw what happened just over a month ago to Wikileaks whistle blower Julian Assange who is now threatened by a long prison sentence or possibly a death penalty if extradited to the United States.

The essential fight today is to preserve the right of our citizens to unhindered access to internet and to avoid hostile attempts by governments of all kinds to legislate internet.

For democracy to function you need well informed citizens. Free and pluralistic media are crucial for European democracy. But even in the EU media freedom is menaced by political interference, commercial pressures and advertising. We should not close our eyes to such pressures and open attacks against pluralism and free speech in countries like Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania.

At the same time, there are a number of challenges which can potentially restrict journalistic freedom or reduce pluralism even in the classical European democracies. We should not forget what happened in the United Kingdom where many media outlets, pretending to be serious, became a tool for spreading lies about the European integration process and succeeded in misleading the British people to vote for Brexit – a historical mistake with tragic proportions.

It is modern these days to talk about fake news. But these discussion very often are used as a cover for attacks against media freedom and journalists disliked by people in power. The real problem is to give way to professional and quality journalism and to limit the influence of “yellow” journalism which deceives people with sensationalist writing and themes.

This is why press freedom needs vigilance and defence. And our association – The European Journalists Association-, is and will always be at the forefront of this crucial struggle.