

EFJ Budapest General Assembly: Europe's Press Fighting at the Frontlines

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The EFJ's General Assembly in Budapest went far beyond a routine annual gathering—it was a collective declaration against mounting threats to media freedom across Europe. Journalists, united in a spirit of borderless solidarity, assumed shared responsibility for defending democratic values. Because democracy only gains meaning through criticism and freedom of expression—and that was the unmistakable message echoed in Budapest.

The 2025 General Assembly of the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) convened in Budapest, Hungary's capital. Yet, this was not merely an administrative event to elect new leadership and define a work plan for the next three years. Set against the backdrop of authoritarian shadows, economic pressure, and digital threats surrounding journalism in Europe today, Budapest became a symbolic stage.

Held on June 2–3, the assembly brought together more than 150 journalists and union representatives from 44 European countries. What made it especially striking was that the host country, Hungary, ranks among the most controversial in Europe when it comes to press freedom.

Choosing Budapest Was No Coincidence—It Was a Stand

The EFJ's decision to hold the assembly in Budapest was intentional. A draft law proposed by the Hungarian government—marketed to the public as a “transparency law” but widely described by journalists as a “censorship law”—cast a heavy shadow over the event.

The bill seeks to label media outlets receiving foreign funding as being under “foreign influence,” place them on special watchlists, exclude them from tax advantages, and cut off their funding flows. In practice, it imposes a financial blockade that threatens the survival of independent media in Hungary.

László M. Lengyel, President of the Hungarian Press Union, opened the event with a stark observation:

“In Hungary, journalism is being economically dismantled. Independent media outlets are losing funding, unable to retain staff, and facing not overt censorship, but enforced silence.”

Ilona Kocsi: “It's the Public, Not Just Journalists, Being Punished”

Ilona Kocsi, President of the Hungarian Journalists and Press Association, went further. She argued that public access to information is now encircled by legal boundaries:

“Journalists are barred from public meetings. Our requests for information are rejected by courts. Now, our legally obtained foreign funding is being taken away. This is not just an attack on journalism—it is an attack on the public’s right to be informed.”

EFJ President Maja Sever: “Truth Needs Infrastructure”

In her speech, EFJ President Maja Sever unveiled the organization’s 2025–2028 work program, focusing on:

- Monitoring and enforcing the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)
- Combating SLAPP lawsuits and establishing legal defense mechanisms
- Mitigating the impact of AI and digital platforms on journalism
- Expanding union rights and collective bargaining
- Securing social protections for freelance journalists
- Strengthening journalist safety and infrastructure for ethical journalism

“Journalism is under siege in Europe. To defend truth, we need more than pens—we need infrastructure, safety, and organized resistance. The EFJ is not just a symbol; it is the engine of that resistance.”

OSCE Media Freedom Representative Bratu: “We Will Not Accept Silence”

Ambassador Jan Linat Bratu, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, highlighted the growing culture of impunity toward crimes against journalists—not just in Hungary, but across many EU countries:

“Investigative journalists are being targeted. Perpetrators of attacks, threats, even murders, are not brought to justice. This is not only an attack on individuals—it is an attack on democratic order. We cannot accept silence.”

Bratu also expressed alarm over regulatory bodies evolving into instruments of censorship:

“Under the EMFA, media regulators must become facilitators, not punishers. These institutions should be led by journalists and governed by ethical principles, free from political dominance.”

This aligns with the EFJ’s broader campaign against the governmental capture of media regulators in the Balkans, Central, and Eastern Europe.

Who Commands the Regulators?

A special session at the congress focused on structural reform of media regulators within the European Media Charter framework. Key proposals included:

- Journalist-majority representation in regulatory bodies
- Full independence from governments, political parties, and capital interests

- Oversight based on transparency and ethical journalism standards
- A shift from punitive to developmental and guiding functions

A delegate from the Austrian Press Council pointedly remarked:

“We cannot allow institutions like Türkiye’s RTÜK to be replicated in Europe. Media regulation must not become a tool of coercion or self-censorship.”

ETUC’s Esther Lynch: “Journalists Are the Frontline of Democracy”

Esther Lynch, Secretary General of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), delivered one of the congress’s most impactful speeches, emphasizing that journalism is at the forefront of the democratic struggle:

“Attacks on journalists are not just personal violations—they are attacks on democracy, social justice, and the public’s right to truth.”

Lynch also addressed the harsh working conditions journalists face across Europe:

- Wages falling behind inflation
- Newsrooms stripped of union protections
- Freelancers deprived of social security
- Increased workloads and burnout
- Exploitation of journalistic labor by digital platforms

Freelancers: Europe’s New Precarious Class

The plight of freelance journalists featured prominently. Still treated as “independent contractors” in many EU countries, freelancers have traditionally been excluded from union rights. However, new European Commission guidelines have opened the door to collective bargaining for them. The EFJ sees this as a turning point.

Yet resistance persists. In countries like Germany, France, and the Netherlands, media owners still refuse to negotiate. The EFJ’s message is unequivocal:

“European institutions must pressure employers. Freelancers are the backbone of journalism—abandoning them is abandoning the profession.”

New Leadership, New Vision

The General Assembly elected a new 9-member Executive Committee. The elected slate reflected a shift toward younger, freelance, and digital-native representatives—indicating EFJ’s evolving role not just as a traditional union, but as a dynamic actor addressing today’s challenges. The democratic engagement of delegates during the elections was also a highlight.

Mustafa Kuleli, who served as Vice President from 2022–2025 after the İzmir Assembly, did not seek reelection. This time, Banu Tuna, Secretary General of the Journalists' Union of Türkiye (TGS), was nominated and elected, ensuring Türkiye remains represented in one of Europe's most influential media organizations.

Priorities of the New EFJ Leadership (2025–2028):

- Local monitoring and reporting on EMFA implementation
- Upholding ethical journalism standards in the face of AI disruption
- Establishing a pan-European social safety net for freelancers
- Democratizing media regulators
- Developing an EU-wide early warning system for journalist safety
- Ensuring economic sustainability of journalism
- Strengthening transnational solidarity mechanisms

From Budapest to All of Europe: A Call to Action

The EFJ Budapest General Assembly showed that journalism in Europe is not just a profession under threat—it is a truth-telling endeavor being actively targeted. Holding the event in Hungary was a defiant act of presence. Across Europe, journalists face the same essential questions: How free is the press? How safe are journalists? And most crucially: Does the infrastructure for truth still exist?

This assembly did more than elect leadership—it charted a roadmap of resistance on Europe's media map. A united front was formed against censorship, self-censorship, digital exploitation, and economic pressure.

Truth alone is not enough. It needs people to nurture, share, and defend it. And the journalists gathered in Budapest have once again declared themselves ready to take on that role.

The EFJ Congress in Budapest demonstrated that the fight for press freedom is waged not only with pens and microphones, but with solidarity and organization. In today's Europe, press freedom is no longer just an ethical issue—it is a cornerstone of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights.

In conclusion, the EFJ's Budapest Congress was not simply an annual meeting. It was a declaration: Journalists are building a borderless front against authoritarianism. Democracy lives only when it is spoken and challenged—and every step taken in Budapest carried meaning not just for the profession, but for the democratic future of Europe.