MEDIA FREEDOM
RAPID RESPONSE

MFRR SUMMIT 2025

REPORT

Co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Co-funded by the European Union

This report presents a summary of the Summit's panels, based on the audio recordings done during the event. The keynote speeches are published word by word but were slightly edited for clarity.

Editors: Elena Rodina, Jamie Wiseman, Anna Berizzi, Ena Bavcic
Special contributor: Mamuka Andguladze

MEDIA FREEDOM RAPID RESPONSE

ECPMF EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR PRESS & MEDIA FREEDOM · ARTICLE 19 EUROPE · efj European Federation of Journalists · FREE PRESS UNLIMITED People deserve to know · IPI International Press Institute · Osservatorio balcani e caucaso transeuropa · CENTRO PER LA COOPERAZIONE INTERNAZIONALE

The Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) Summit 2025, that took place on 13 October 2025 at the representation of the European Tyrol-South Tyrol-Trentino in Brussels, addressed the most pressing challenges faced by journalists and media outlets within the EU and candidate countries.

Being a journalist today is hard. Journalistic work is underfunded, journalists are attacked and harassed, verbally and physically, often by those who are paid to protect them – police and state power-holders. Attacks have become more sophisticated as the technology evolved: malicious actors target critical journalists with troll armies, spyware, DDOS attacks, create AI-generated false images and videos to discredit the most vocal and independent journalists.

For the year of 2024 MFRR and our monitoring platform, Mapping Media Freedom, have recorded over 1500 press freedom violations – which is almost 400 cases more than in the previous year. In the last six months (January-June 2025) we have already recorded over 700 violations, so the numbers keep growing. This is a grim and alarming picture.

And yet, our MFRR Summit 2025 was about hope: hope that in the midst of growing challenges and increasing pressure, together we have the power to make things better. This year's Summit fed into EU Democracy Shield policy discussions, highlighting journalism as vital democratic infrastructure. Drawing on MFRR's monitoring, missions, and policy work, the event explored five key pillars of media resilience: economic viability, safety, legal protection, AI governance, and implementation of safeguards.

With a focus on finding practical solutions and sharing experiences, the Summit brought together experts, journalists, and media advocates from across Europe, including a special spotlight interview with Ukrainian journalists.

The MFRR Summit 2025 was organised by MFRR's leading organisation, European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, with support and participation from MFRR founding partners: Article 19 Europe, European Federation of Journalists, Free Press Unlimited, International Press Institute, and Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa. This report provides an overview of the event, with additional analysis, and we hope that it will prompt further discussions and collaborations among journalists, politicians, policy-makers, and experts.

We are delighted to announce that the next edition of MFRR Summit will take place in October 2026 - keep updated and make plans to join us in Brussels!

Elena Rodina,

Coordinator of the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) project,

European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF)

5 **OPENING KEYNOTE**
Commissioner Michael McGrath;
Honorable Valentina Grippo

9 **PANEL 1**
Media Economy Under Pressure:
How to Ensure Economic Viability

13 **PANEL 2**
Unsafe to Report:
Why Journalists Keep Looking Over Their Shoulders

17 **PANEL 3**
Spoofing, Surveillance, Spyware:
Journalists against Digital Threats

21 **PANEL 4**
Legal Protections. EMFA, Anti-SLAPP Directive:
Implementation Highlights and Challenges

24 **UKRAINE**
Spotlight Interview

27 **PANEL 5**
The Authoritarian Playbook:
Foreign Agent Laws in the EU's Shadow

OPENING KEYNOTES

Michael McGrath, EU Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law, and Consumer Protection

Hello and good morning. Unfortunately, I can't be with you today, but I am delighted to have a chance to address you through this video message.

I would like to begin by taking the opportunity to thank you for the crucial work you do in safeguarding media freedom. Before becoming Commissioner, I served as an elected representative in Ireland for 25 years. I know just how crucial media freedom is to our democratic safeguards and our free, open and pluralist societies.

For years, you have been undertaking work fundamental to our democratic checks and balances, tracking, monitoring and reacting to violations of press and media freedom across member states and candidate countries, and providing legal and practical support and advocacy. So, thank you for your dedication to this fundamental right that underpins our European democracies and values.

It is because media freedom is so essential that we continue to embed it within our annual Rule of Law report, covering all member states and currently four candidate countries.The Commission takes its responsibility to help ensure that journalists can work safely and without fear of reprisal very seriously indeed. Building on the anti-SLAPPs package and the 2021 Commission Recommendation on the protection of journalists, the adoption of the European Media Freedom Act embodies that commitment.

The Act provides unprecedented safeguards to protect sources and communications. Following its entry into application in August of this year, we are now focusing on its enforcement and will continue to support its implementation. And this is why I am glad to see that you will be discussing the European Media Freedom Act, or EMFA, as well as spyware and surveillance, in two of your panels today.

Within the framework of the European Democracy Shield that we are currently preparing, media freedom will be a vital component, whether that be in providing the public with accurate information or promoting democratic debate. Thank you for providing your experience, expertise and insight in journalistic security and economic viability as part of the public consultation. We aim to present the Democracy Shield proposal by the end of this year.

Alongside bolstering media freedom, the Democracy Shield will aim to strengthen our protection against information manipulation, interference and disinformation. To increase societal resilience against information manipulation and disinformation, the Commission will support media literacy and critical thinking by building on existing structures such as the Media and Literacy Expert Group.

We also need to do more to support the economic viability of the journalism sector, given the profound changes that very large online platforms have brought to the media landscape. The Democracy Shield is still taking shape, but we are currently reflecting on how to ensure that quality journalism can be supported in the long term. We have also recently proposed the “AgoraEU” programme for the next multi-annual financial framework, that's the next EU budget, which includes funding also for the media sector.

I look forward to continuing our work together to protect media freedom. Once again, thank you for all that you do to support and uphold this fundamental safeguard of our collective European democracies and our free, open and pluralistic societies.

Thank you.

Valentina Grippo, General Rapporteur on Media Freedom and Safety of Journalists, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe*

I really wanted to be here in person, because it's a great pleasure and a deep responsibility to open the discussion today here in Brussels. I believe it's a very intense discussion after seeing the panel.

First of all, I wish to add my thanks for your dedication for the value of today's discussion. And also, the importance of having all the institutions and associations who deal with this vital issue working together: we have the Council of Europe, which I represent, the European Commission, the MFRR, but we have a lot of other subjects that deal with the issue.

And I found as a general Rapporteur of the safety of journalists of the Council of Europe, that one of the main challenges is to work together, all these institutions, which will be the vital issue for democracy and freedom, such as the freedom of information. And so, we need partnerships that are not just symbolic, it's the essence of what we need today: a shared, coordinated and practical alliance for the protection of journalists and for the defence of media freedom.

It is indeed a dangerous time for truth. We all know the data, but we should not grow numb to them: more than 1500 violations of press freedom in Europe over the past year. Each case represents a person, a journalist silenced, attacked, harassed, or made invisible.

And the trends are worrying: police violence at protests, online smear campaigns, digital surveillance, a new form of intimidation. We are not only dealing with the huge issue of journalists at war, which is a main issue, but we have an everyday intimidation and low tolerance of freedom of information across all Europe, which should worry us very much. What this means is that the very actors meant to guarantee the rule of law are increasingly becoming its violators. I'm sorry to say that, but it happens in a lot of European states and it's not an isolated crisis, it is a systemic erosion of democratic norms, a coercion of the culture of accountability that should hold those powers to scrutiny.

Coming to what the Council of Europe is trying to do in this framework, we have, probably most of you know, the Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists, which is our main instrument. If you don't, you should access it and follow it because it's a very interesting and important instrument.

Our alerts now cover 46 member states and the funding for 2025 revealed five persistent and interlinked challenges: first, physical and digital attack on journalists; second, political and corporate capture of media; third, we had a specific initiative on that last year, SLAPs and judicial harassment to journalists; fourth, the growing misuse of AI and surveillance technologies, this is a major issue that came out during the last year; and, transnational repression targeting exiled journalists even within Europe.

As General Rapporteur on media freedom, I'm currently working on three major reports addressing precisely this issue, we had several in the last year, but the ones for you to know that we are working on in this precise moment is one on media concentration and capture, analysing how ownership structure and political influence threaten pluralism. This is a main issue because we have two tendencies: one, it's political, trying to be present in the ownership of public and private media by governments and by those who have been observed by the press. On the other side, an economic crisis for the small independent local media. So, these two tendencies are very worrying together.

The second main path I'm working on is the impact of AI and content moderation on the platform, exploring how algorithms and open platform policies shape access to information. And third, SLAPPs. SLAPPs, it's a subtle issue and we are trying to see how the different state European law is being (nice) to silence journalists and public watchdog. These topics may seem distinct, but they will lead to the same conclusion: the safety of journalists is the precondition for the safety of democracy itself.

Of course, as an institution, we are on the front lines in big humanitarian issues; thus, in Ukraine, we undertook a lot of different actions as the Council of Europe. Since Russia's full scale invasion, more than 100 journalists have been killed and 26 remain unlawfully detained. Many were deliberately targeted despite being clearly identified as press. So, this is, of course, a huge issue. And the Parliamentary Assembly just last week also approached the information in Gaza.

We had a lot of discussion before, but we had a memorandum just last week that you can access on the Council of Europe platform, with an urgent resolution calling for an immediate end to the killing of journalists and reaffirming their civilian status under international humanitarian law. So, we just established this, for your information, an annual commemoration. This happened five days ago, which is called Victory for Victoria in memory of the young Ukrainian journalist Victoria Roshchyna, who died in Russian custody just last July. She was a very courageous journalist who we wanted to honour with this prize.

To get to my personal experience that I think it's important to share with you today, before entering the Italian Parliament, before having the role that I have in the Council of Europe, I was a journalist myself. And I can say with both pride and concern that journalism has become one of the most fragile professions in our democracies.

Today, even in stable European states, press freedom is under pressure, not only from authoritarian actors or criminal networks, but also from the normalisation of hostility towards the media. And too often politicians remain silent and the silence is dangerous, because every unchallenged attack, every new retreat becomes an implicit authorisation for the next one.

So, I will be with you all day and we will have occasion to exchange views, but having had this double role as a journalist before and as a politician after, I understand that when you are an institution, you might prefer not to be too much under pressure, too much commented on, noticed too much... But we all need governments, and it has to start at the European Union level, at the Council of Europe – they are aware that the so-called watchdog, or whoever controls democracy, is a guarantor for the institutions themselves, ensuring that they are able to keep doing their job in the best way.

Thank you.

**transcript is lightly edited for clarity*



Renate Schroeder, Director at the European Federation of Journalists
Credits: Sam Glazier

PANEL 1: MEDIA ECONOMY UNDER PRESSURE: HOW TO ENSURE ECONOMIC VIABILITY

Overview

“Information is a public good that market forces alone will never supply at the level of our modern society demands. Current business models are failing and as revenue shifts to online platforms, powerful entities can co-opt or silence independent media. The alarmingly state support for public interest media remains low, especially when contrasted with the substantial resources allocated to propaganda by autocratic regimes”.

The words of the Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, quoted by Renate Schroeder, Director at the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) and panel moderator, express the precarious situation media outlets are facing today. Panel participants offered a discussion about the problems related to the increasing economic pressure faced by media outlets across Europe. In particular, Salla Nazarenko, International Affairs Specialist at Suomen Journalistiliitto, explained the general financial and political pressure that the Finnish media experience at the national level; Alina Păduraru, Executive Manager at Recorder, presented the testimony of a small independent Romanian media organisation; Sarah Murphy Madia, Journalist and Policy Lead at WHAT TO FIX, discussed the roles of large digital platforms and their monetisation programmes; and finally, Anna Herold, Head of the Audiovisual and Media Services Policy Unit at the European Commission, provided an overview of European initiatives aimed at ensuring the resilience of the journalism sector.

Focus on the Finnish situation

Finland has always been a model nation in terms of media freedom, but since 2017, it has suffered an unexpected slide in the World Press Freedom Index, falling from first to the third place in RSF’s global rankings, and then to the fifth (2022-25). According to Salla Nazarenko, the main problem affecting press freedom in Finland is economic and political in nature: the ruling Parliament has implemented major cuts to the funding of YLE, the national broadcasting company, forcing the dismissal of hundreds of highly reputable and popular journalists. In addition to this, as she explained, Finland's largest media company, Sanoma Corporation, recently announced that it will stop purchasing the services of STT. STT, a Helsinki-based news agency, does not only strongly rely on selling its content to the media and therefore risks closure, but is also approximately 75% owned by Sanoma Corporation itself.

As the speaker elaborated, the consequences of these and other economic and political actions pose a serious threat to media pluralism: they drastically reduce the ability of local and regional media to draw on national agencies, thus damaging the diversity of information sources available to citizens.

According to Nazarenko, since 2010, Finland has seen a 50% decrease in the number of full-time journalists, as the government does not seem to prioritise investment in supporting independent journalism for political reasons. Therefore, she expressed the need for intervention from the European Union and the United Nations, in the hope of reaffirming and facilitating the fundamental role that journalists play in democratic societies.

Recorder: A small media outlet example from Romania

As Alina Păduraru explained, Recorder, founded in 2017 in Bucharest, is an independent video outlet that mainly produces investigative videos and documentaries aimed at truthfully describing changes within Romanian society. Today, it remains the only independent Romanian media outlet that is funded almost exclusively by its readers.

Since its foundation, Recorder has been produced by Alina Păduraru herself and a few other journalists working in the field. Inspired by The Guardian and focusing on maintaining a relationship of trust and transparency with its readers, the Romanian outlet obtained 90% of its revenue from spontaneous donations within eight years; this significant financial support stems from immense fundraising efforts, for which "the content is the best fundraising campaign you can have", according to Păduraru.

However, although Recorder has more than 1.2 million subscribers on three different YouTube channels and YouTube advertising agreements, Păduraru reported that the latter account for almost 0% of Recorder's revenue.

Potential regulation and advocacy against shortchanging platforms

According to Sarah Murphy Madia, the social media ecosystem in which media outlets, public interest media, and authentic creators exist and compete amidst today is largely shaped by platforms' monetisation services, including their revenue redistribution programmes.The first social media revenue redistribution program was YouTube's Partner Programme, known as YPP. When YouTube pioneered this monetisation model, it offered vetted creators and publishers an opportunity to 1) opt in to having advertisements run alongside their content, and then 2) receive a share of the revenue generated by the ads placed alongside their content, she explained. Variations of this "ad revenue redistribution" model were iterated across other social media platforms.

Since 2020, however, YouTube moved to monetise all content on its platform without any obligation to pay its creators. According to Murphy Madia, YouTube shifted to paying YPP members royalties based on opaque content performance calculations. She explained that this means YPP members – including authentic creators and public-interest media – have now lost control over, and revenue from, the direct sale of advertising space.

Murphy Madia explained that similar moves have been made across social platforms, where revenue redistribution monetisation programmes have shifted away from paying onboarded creators/publishers a cut of the revenue earned from ads running alongside their content – ad space that used to belong in some sense to the creator/publisher – to models where monetised creators and publishers earn payouts according to opaque and unpredictable content performance calculations.

Given that revenue redistribution programs are the way social platforms have chosen to approach the media compensation question, the speaker noted that this shift, which has gone largely unnoticed, should alarm those concerned about media viability.

The speaker further elaborated on how such programmes have been rolled out recklessly, without platforms performing adequate due diligence on the accounts they onboard into their revenue redistribution or content monetisation programs.

For example, Meta is the only platform to publicly disclose who it has onboarded into its revenue redistribution programmes, and these disclosures reveal the onboarding of countless accounts that do not comply with the company's own partner monetisation policies. Indeed, according to Meta's own partner-publisher disclosures, it has onboarded entities sanctioned by the EU and the US. The reckless rollout and poor policy enforcement of Meta's monetisation programmes, as well as that of other platforms, has also incentivised and funded the automated, inauthentic content industry, which is tailor-made to take full advantage of these systems, according to the speaker.

She elaborated that the situation for authentic creators and public interest media is made all the more precarious because monetisation policy enforcement seems to take place at the content rather than

account level, and is done so fully through automated systems. This results in public interest media often being temporarily demonetised due to automated systems that flag their content as “sensitive” if it deals with social or political issues. As far as WHAT TO FIX can tell, no platform offers publishers recourse to claim compensation for income lost due to these mistaken automated demonetisation decisions. While authentic creators and public interest media may indeed find themselves onboarded back into revenue redistribution programs after an appeal process or penalisation period, they cannot fairly compete, much less remain financially viable, within a social media ecosystem where platforms have no incentive to correct their monetisation policy enforcement errors, and where poor monetisation governance means an inauthentic automated content industry is financially incentivised to exploit revenue redistribution programs and other monetisation services while flooding platforms with low-quality and inauthentic content.

For this reason, WHAT TO FIX is working with various stakeholders on shared principles in order to make social media monetisation service transparency mandatory as well as to advocate for things like fair and predictable compensation for creators and media, Murphy Madia said; since 2019, this non-profit organisation has been downloading and collating daily public lists of monetised accounts on Facebook, creating a large database where it is possible to explore the Facebook monetisation history of accounts previously and currently enrolled in the platform’s revenue redistribution programs. Notably, the data does not include details around amounts of money transferred or the identities of final beneficiaries. According to Murphy Madia, this kind of transparency should be implemented by law at a supranational level thus shedding light on how media is faring against this broader system.

Overview of EU political initiatives

Although the panel's contributions highlighted the enormous economic pressure the media in various European countries are facing, according to Anna Herold it is encouraging to note a greater political awareness than ever before about the situation in the media: just recently the publication of the EMFA and the work of pioneers such as Věra Jourová (former Vice President of the European Commission for Values and Transparency), as well as the speech by the President of the European Commission von der Leyen on the media resilience programme have openly championed the cause.

Journalism is not only important for providing citizens with accurate information and raising awareness, it is also crucial for our democratic stability and national security, according to Herold. Thus, the European Commission considers media to be a critical infrastructure for protecting citizens' rights and is therefore making great efforts to implement the EMFA, tighten controls on digital platforms, defend the equality of online content, and combat the algorithmic rule of prominence and the opacity of digital advertising, whose monetisation mechanisms penalise the media, Herold stated.

Finally, she emphasised the urgent need for targeted public funding aimed at supporting the journalism sector and at correcting the current distortions generated by digital platforms, which are, unfortunately, structural in nature.



Hamdi Firat Buyuk, Journalist and Editor at BIRN
Credits: Sam Glazier

PANEL 2: UNSAFE TO REPORT. WHY JOURNALISTS KEEP LOOKING OVER THEIR SHOULDERS

Overview

Attacks against journalists are intensifying. Between October 2024 and October 2025, Mapping Media Freedom (MapMF) registered 1464 alerts, affecting 2447 media professionals in EU member states and candidate countries. Of these, 387 incidents related to physical assaults or attacks on property, while 587 included verbal attacks. At the same time, the media finds itself at a crossroads of decreasing funding revenues and increased political tensions globally.

Following introductions of the distinguished panelists: Irma Dimitradze, Communications Manager and Journalist at Batumelebi and Netgazeti; the Honorable Valentina Grippo, General Rapporteur on Media Freedom and Safety of Journalists at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe; Hamdi Firat Buyuk, Journalist and Editor at BIRN; Wael Eskandar, Visual Impact Producer at Lighthouse Reports; and Yanis Mhamdi, Investigative Reporter at Blast; moderator Ena Bavčić, Advocacy and Policy Advisor at the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), opened the floor to a critical discussion. The focus was on the escalating safety challenges faced by journalists across European states, where protests, threats, violence, smear campaigns, and digital intimidation are increasingly putting press freedom at risk. The panel zoomed in on the MFRR findings from its recent on-the-ground missions, highlighting the most urgent safety issues and discussing possible solutions.

World from an imprisoned journalist – Letter from Mzia Amaglobeli

After recalling Georgia's past as a refuge for people, journalists, and human rights defenders, Irma Dimitradze read the letter from Mzia Amaglobeli, the first female Georgian journalist to be imprisoned on politically motivated charges. We are providing the entire letter word by word:

> *"Dear friends and colleagues, greetings from Georgia, from my prison cell, where I have plenty of time to think and little I can do.*
>
> *Nine months have passed in this cell. The walls have not changed, but the darkness has. It's slowly taking my sight. I want to start by telling you thank you, thank you for standing with my colleagues, with me, and with journalists everywhere where they face the repression, with courage.*
>
> *This past year has been one of the hardest for journalism: around the world, reporters risk their lives and freedom to tell the truth. We have lost so many brave colleagues. I want to express my deepest respect for their fight that others continue now.*
>
> *Here in Georgia, many of those voices are women leading independent media, often paying a heavy price. And, as we have only one prison for women inmates, I live with a fear that one day I might hear one of their voices' echo in the corridors.*
>
> *Now journalism means self-sacrifice. In my country, my colleagues are attacked daily with different means. And a country of 3.5 million holds over a hundred political prisoners. It all happened very quickly.*
>
> *Though we always knew hybrid warfare was here, our democracy was never unbeatably strong. Yet a few months was all that took to collapse and it came as a shock for many. Not for me though, because I had seen the power that the regime had at its disposal.*

Before my arrest, my team and I exposed how state institutions were used to manipulate voters. Personal data from every government agency was funneled into one place - the state security service successor to the KGB - and then handed to the ruling party. I am talking about the data which contains all sorts of details of each individual's life that can be used for creating alternative realities and for challenging the truth.

This is part of broader modern warfare, one that doesn't just occupy land but captures minds: the hybrid warfare that Russia, and not only, has been mastering for years. And yet, its power is challenged by strong, independent journalism. That is why my voice is still heard there, in Brussels, while I am kept imprisoned.

We have heard that journalism should be treated as merely business, not a mission. But what we see is that when institutions fail or abandon justice, journalists become the last line of defence for the public. That is why media freedom is a matter of security. From this zone, freedom, justice, the truth, no longer feel like ideals. They are oxygen. You only realise their value when they are taken away. The fear of losing freedoms and establishment of authoritarianism is what fuels me and what drives journalists everywhere to keep reporting under fire, to return after beatings, to refuse silence in the face of violence.

So, I ask you, don't let the darkness spread, not in Georgia and not anywhere. Keep your eyes on those who fight for freedom, cover them, protect them, stand stronger than ever, demand accountability, fight impunity, believe in yourself and most importantly, fight together as the strength lies in unity, as we say in Georgia."

Citizens' trust and press freedom

Reflecting on the previous panel and concerns at the European level, Hon. Valentina Grippo emphasised that in addition to the need for political intervention - including legislative, legal and judicial action - the real change for journalists depends on citizens' trust in free journalism. She warned that government attacks on journalists threaten not only their civil rights but also the public's right to be informed. In democratic countries like Italy, journalists face constant economic and political pressure, becoming victims of distorted narratives.

Grippo highlighted the algorithmic system of digital platforms that are increasingly functioning as a place where, instead of democratic confrontation of different ideas, we see "just a polarisation of ideas". She called for a "generic design and picture of a right to information that is well defended, certainly from the point of view of journalists, but in general from the point of view of older citizens who deserve accurate information". Grippo added that this information emergency will be at the core of the Council of Europe's PACE commitments.

Persecution of journalists and self-censorship

Journalists across Europe face a "general state of insecurity," fuelled by repressive state measures, said Irma Dimitradze noted in her concluding words.

"When the state stops protecting you that means (that) it will attack you," said Dimitradze.

One of the starkest examples of the pressure exerted by states on journalists within the EU and candidate countries is in Türkiye. Hamdi Firat Buyuk highlighted a severe crackdown on journalists, including imprisonment, financial pressure, court cases, and digital harassment, intensified amid protests by opposition groups. Increased rates of legal persecution and court cases, combined with the fact that the Türkiye government or its allies control about 95% of Turkish media, according to studies, result in high

levels of self-censorship. Journalists Ahmet Dönmez, Erk Acarer, Can Dündar, Metin Cihan and many others face daily threats from far-right groups and the blocking of their profiles on various social media platforms and websites.

Buyuk attributed this to "disinformation, national security and public order [...], draconian laws and regulations, which were accepted in recent years, including the disinformation law, [...], the cybersecurity law and social media law"; as well as bills such as those on foreign influence.

Focus on the Western Europe – Touching on contested issues

Though the contexts in France and Germany are significantly different from Türkiye, Wael Eskandar and Yanis Mhamdi have painted a picture in which media funding depends on a limited group of institutions and businesses, which can result in biased promotion of ideological interests. In Germany, a debate on state funding being intertwined with political influence has been particularly visible in the case of reporting on Gaza, where, according to Eskandar, a number of outlets have reported ideologically on the issue. Furthermore, the German police are taking violent action not only against journalists covering demonstrations, but in general against anyone who represents a particular movement in support of the Palestinian cause, as stated by Eskandar.

At the same time Yanis Mhamdi describes how roughly 90% of French media is owned by billionaires, according to estimates, who may attempt to assert political influence. French journalism lives in the shadow of the so-called Procédure-bâillon, or SLAPP lawsuits, a procedure that discourages investigative journalism as it greatly slows down the work of journalists and forces them to incur significant expenses, according to him. Other examples of pressure Mhamdi shared are of his colleague who was held in custody for 36 hours simply because she was investigating arms sales to Israel. Similarly, a French journalist was questioned by the secret services because of his investigative work.

Eskandar's interventions, revealing the potential of state funding to come with ideological and political control in German media, were contested by a person in the audience. Acknowledging the increasing number of issues for journalists in Germany, an existing assurance of the separation of powers and independence has been pointed out by a representative of a German public broadcaster, ZDF. Eskandar admitted that though this attitude cannot be generally applied, it is a warning sign of how media freedom is in decline.

Journalists and media workers can sometimes join activist actions, and the tendency to label such actions as activist has been pointed out. Mhamdi recalls his participation in the Madleen Freedom flotilla, in which he participated as a journalist, wearing a press uniform. Being detained for a week by the Israeli Army, French authorities dismissed his journalism as activism, reflecting broader efforts to control narratives and silence critical reporting.

He concludes, "It is journalists who shape public opinion. [...] And after that, we can only say that we do what we can do and we will see what happens."



Francesco Cancellato, editor-in-chief of Fanpage.it
Credits: Sam Glazier

PANEL 3: SPOOFING, SURVEILLANCE, SPYWARE. JOURNALISTS AGAINST DIGITAL THREATS

Overview

Digital threats are a lived reality for journalists, activists, and citizens alike. They range from spyware and targeted harassment to disinformation campaigns and AI-enabled attacks, and often involve the complicity or even direct action of state actors. At the same time, there is no pure digital domain when it comes to threats - the digital space is tightly connected to the physical one, digital threats quickly turn into physical ones, affecting the well-being of journalists, their families, and those close to them. These words, reflecting the opening remarks of Dimitri Bettoni, Researcher at Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT) and the moderator of the panel on digital threats, set the stage for a discussion about the complex landscape of modern media vulnerability.

Panel participants included Dragana Obradovic, Director of BIRN Serbia; Francesco Cancellato, editor-in-chief of Fanpage.it in Italy; Sarah Thust, journalist at CORRECTIV in Germany; Stanley Kwenda, Strategic Communication Advisor at Amnesty International; and Asha Allen, Director and Secretary General of CDT Europe.

Digital threats in Serbia

According to Dragana Obradovic, Serbia provides a vivid illustration of how digital threats can escalate over time; at the same time, the Serbian example is not unique – it represents a part of the "dictator's handbook" used worldwide. BIRN has monitoried the use of intrusive technologies by state actors for more than a decade, following public procurements, the use of spyware and other digital surveillance tools, as Obradovic explained. That enabled us to collect evidence of the use of Cognite, Predator, Celebrite, Novy Spy, and Pegasus, and to prove that journalists, activists, and citizens involved in protests or civil society initiatives were targeted. "It is not something that happens overnight, - emphasised the speaker. But it is something that you should be aware of and keep an eye on... because that puts us in a position to be prepared for what came after."

Obradovic highlighted that digital threats intensified since the political unrest of 2023, when hundreds of violations were recorded. The most common attacks included smear campaigns, AI-generated deepfakes, data leaks to government-aligned media, and widespread surveillance that targeted primarily activists and journalists. The right to peaceful assembly and freedom of speech and information were particularly undermined in the last year.

To confront these challenges, Obradovic described a multi-pronged strategy adopted by BIRN. The organisation systematically documents digital rights violations, monitors privacy infringements, and investigates public procurement for intrusive technologies. Partnerships with civil society, academia, and technical experts enabled evidence-based reporting and policy advocacy. Obradovic emphasised the importance of giving victims a voice, noting that prolonged digital harassment dehumanises targets and discourages engagement. The combination of reporting, monitoring, and civil society collaboration, she explained, has enabled the publication of investigative work that exposes state surveillance mechanisms.

Mercenary spyware against journalists: An example from Italy

Francesco Cancellato provided insight into the Italian context, where journalists have faced attacks from mercenary spyware, including Cancellato and his media outlet. According to Cancellato, the spyware

targeting Fanpage.it affected journalists, activists, and finance professionals, but legal protections and government oversight were insufficient to identify perpetrators or prevent abuse. He stated that while Italian law prohibits the surveillance of journalists, enforcement is weak, and official responses are slow or non-existent. “Can you imagine” - Cancellato provided a vivid comparison, - “the police coming to your house after you were robbed, and you say: ‘Help me, who robbed in my house?’ and they say ‘We are not the robbers, see you, bye-bye’! End of investigation.” This situation is hard to imagine in relation to a commonplace robbery, but this is exactly what took place when Cancellato was targeted with mercenary spyware, he explained.

Cancellato argued that these incidents reveal a systemic problem: the availability of commercial spyware combined with limited regulation creates an environment in which abuse is virtually inevitable. As a response, he described personal security measures including encrypted communications, the use of multiple devices, and physical precautions to mitigate exposure. According to him, these steps are necessary because relying solely on legislation or state accountability is inadequate in the current context.

Digital threats across borders: Case of CORRECTIV

Sarah Thust discussed the threats facing media organisations at the collective level, providing an example of a coordinated digital attack against her outlet, an independent non-profit newsroom CORRECTIV based in Germany. According to Thust, a group of CORRECTIV journalists, including Sarah herself, investigated the Russian “Doppelganger” influence campaign, exposing infrastructure used to propagate disinformation. This reporting triggered an avalanche of DDoS attacks, creation of fake websites, and the circulation of deepfake videos targeting the team.

These experiences demonstrated how crucial it is for the investigative journalists to be prepared for transnational digital threats (in this particular case, the attacks were traced back to the Russian government), and engage in collaboration with IT experts, hosting platforms, and organisations capable of providing digital forensic support. As Thust explained, small outlets are especially vulnerable, and the combination of technical skill and institutional support is crucial to withstand coordinated digital campaigns, especially when the entire governments wage them.

Responding to digital threats

Stanley Kwenda highlighted the broader implications of digital threats, framing them as human rights issues. According to Kwenda, targeting journalists and activists undermines society’s ability to safeguard the practice of journalism and by extension democracy, as journalists and activists are those who are standing in the front line of safeguarding human rights. Amnesty International responds to such threats by conducting digital forensic investigations, training journalists and activists through fellowship programs, and promoting digital hygiene practices, the speaker explained. “If you are targeted by something mysterious that you don't know, and you don't know who's behind it, like, for instance, in the case of Cancellato, it leaves you with a very paralysing feeling,” Kwenda said. He stressed that awareness of unusual activity on devices, regular software updates, and collaboration with specialised expert organisations are essential measures for protection. The overarching message, he noted, is that digital security is not an individual responsibility but a collective effort that requires partnerships across civil society, media, and technical domains.

Advocacy and regulation in the EU context

Asha Allen addressed the policy and legal dimensions of digital threats in Europe. According to Allen, advocacy efforts by CDT Europe and partner organisations aim to address gaps in EU and national

regulations governing spyware and surveillance technologies. While some safeguards exist, national security exemptions and fragmented oversight create opportunities for misuse. She highlighted the findings of research conducted by CDT Europe into the enforcement of the Dual-Use Regulation and noted that fragmented enforcement and lack of oversight on the trade of spyware technologies intra-EU results in serious human rights and transparency concerns.

The speaker argued that journalists' investigative work is central to advocacy, as it provides the evidence necessary to push for legal reforms and accountability. "Despite challenges", Allen added, "we must stay positive and use these opportunities. We can also leverage rule of law mechanisms to address countries spying on journalists and citizens, and consider the conditionality of EU funding."

Audience questions and discussion

During the discussion with the audience, Obradovic emphasised that, when it comes to post-communist states, journalists still need to educate the general population on what is wrong with surveillance and violation of privacy. According to her, it is not a given that the broader public understands the dangers, however, recently the situation has started to change. Over time, as citizens themselves experience digital harassment or privacy violations, they may become more active participants in defending digital rights. Obradovic stressed that we must focus on equipping journalists with the infrastructure, training, and expertise necessary to respond to digital threats. Thust added that technical vigilance, prompt engagement with hosting companies, and monitoring digital domains are practical steps that can neutralise some threats. Cancellato reiterated that personal security measures, including encryption and device segregation, are critical, particularly in environments where state oversight is ineffective.



Oliver Money-Kyrle, Head of Europe Advocacy and Programmes at the International Press Institute (IPI)
Credits: Sam Glazier

PANEL 4: LEGAL PROTECTIONS. EMFA, ANTI-SLAPP DIRECTIVE: IMPLEMENTATION HIGHLIGHTS AND CHALLENGES

Overview

With the Anti-SLAPP Directive and EMFA passed, the real battle is in effective national transposition. The MFRR Summit grounded this discussion into its close observations of challenges that implementation of the protective laws faces and the developments on the ground in regards to the new legislation and regulations. How do we ensure that the "good" laws make real change in safeguarding free and independent journalists?

According to the panel moderator Oliver Money-Kyrle, Head of Europe Advocacy and Programmes at the International Press Institute (IPI), understanding legal protections requires recognising both the formal and practical dimensions: while directives and regulations exist on paper, their impact depends on political will, transparency, and engagement from journalists and civil society. Panel participants included Director at Media and Journalism Research Center, Marius Dragomir, Senior Legal Advisor at the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), Flutura Kusari, investigative journalist at Telegram (Croatia), Dora Kršul, and Danai Maragoudaki, journalist at Solomon (Greece). Panelists discussed the current state of these instruments, sharing experiences from multiple Member States and highlighting practical enforcement gaps.

Media capture and EMFA implementation

Marius Dragomir explained that media capture occurs via multiple channels: regulation, control over public service media, state funding, and ownership concentration. He noted that the EMFA addresses these pillars, offering transparency and safeguards, which is encouraging to see. "The question is now, how will that play out in reality?" said Dragomir.

According to a research initiative Dragomir is a part of (which looks into seven European countries: Finland, Spain, Slovakia, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Greece), EMFA implementation varies widely: countries like Finland already have strong protections, while others, including Slovakia and Hungary, may see little change due to entrenched political control. The speaker cited Hungary as a textbook example of media capture, where political parties systematically consolidated control over media since 2010.

What should be in the center of this discussion, according to Dragomir, is the financial independence of the media. He described a model in which some governments use state advertising to indirectly acquire or influence media, thus ensuring that the outlets remain supportive of power-holders. The speaker emphasised that current EU legislation, including EMFA, does not address this mechanism, leaving a fundamental vulnerability unmitigated. Nonetheless, he acknowledged EMFA as a significant step forward for European media policy, and probably "the most progressive step taken by the EU ever."

Anti-SLAPP Directive and legal support

Flutura Kusari described how in the last half a decade, she has been focused on documenting and addressing the problem of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) across Europe. The case of murdered journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta made it evident that SLAPPs were not confined to a single country but represented a broader challenge across Europe. The speaker explained how, together with many colleagues and with international organisations, they have tirelessly advocated to convince the European Commission, the Council of Europe and the European Parliament to come up with a European solution to SLAPPs. With the support from Caurana Galizia's family, as well as that of policymakers such as Věra Jourová, Roberta Metsola, and David Casa, these efforts have led to the establishment of European standards, including an EU Anti-

SLAPP directive, a Council of Europe recommendation, and a European Union recommendation, which now provide national legislators with clear guidance on addressing SLAPPs effectively.

The speaker emphasised that these standards are designed to enable courts to dismiss frivolous or abusive cases quickly, preventing the misuse of legal processes by powerful individuals to intimidate journalists. The ultimate goal is to discourage future abuses of the law while ensuring procedural safeguards remain in place.

To monitor progress, the team has established an online platform in collaboration with the Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe and ECPMF, tracking the transposition of these standards in 46 Council of Europe member states, plus Kosovo. The speaker stressed the importance of high-quality legislation that addresses domestic and cross-border SLAPPs, involves civil society in the drafting process, and draws on the expertise of European institutions for more effective implementation. "There is an obligation for member states of the EU to transpose the EU directive, but the Council of Europe recommendation is not obligatory, - explained Kusari. – What we want is for both the Council of Europe recommendation and EU directive to be transposed at the same time".

In addition to legal reforms, the speaker discussed the importance of timely documentation: continuous monitoring through platforms like Mapping Media Freedom ensures the problem remains visible and prevents it from being underestimated in the future. Equally important is providing support to journalists facing SLAPPs, including public solidarity, court accompaniment, and financial assistance. The speaker noted that even winnable cases impose severe burdens on journalists, hence it is crucial to provide comprehensive support systems in addition to legislative measures.

Practical challenges in Member States

Dora Kršul provided an example of Croatia, expressing her skepticism about the possibility of effective implementation of the EMFA and Anti-SLAPP directive in the country. Despite keeping up with the formalities and being seemingly "Euro-friendly", the Croatian government appears to "hate free media," said the speaker. According to the journalist, the state advertising favors friendly outlets, local funding lacks transparency, and political pressure on media is persistently high. Kršul described her own experience facing SLAPPs from the former rector of the University of Zagreb after her reporting on corruption in academia. One case was dismissed, while another, now in its fifth year, is still ongoing, which illustrates how drawn-out court processes become a form of punishment in themselves.

Danai Maragoudaki offered a stark and candid account of Greece's situation of entrenched media freedom crisis: the landscape is dominated by billionaire-owned media, while independent journalists become targets of government surveillance, smear campaigns, police violence at protests, and SLAPPs. Thus, Greece has faced a major spyware scandal involving Predator, and journalists, including colleagues of the speaker, were surveilled by the national intelligence service. "We are now ranking 89th in RSF's press freedom list, - mentioned Maragoudaki, - which makes us in last place among the EU countries." While legal frameworks exist, enforcement is weak, said the speaker. The journalist explained that there are two realities: the one that is on paper, and the one that really takes place; "it is common knowledge that even though the law says something, it doesn't mean anything", she noted, describing a society where legal frameworks are publicly acknowledged but privately dismissed.

Audience questions and discussion

During the discussion, the audience raised concerns about journalists' limited awareness of EU legal protections and the practical challenges of applying them in day-to-day reporting. In response to this, panelists emphasised the need for awareness campaigns, training, and engagement with journalist unions to ensure that EMFA and Anti-SLAPP measures are broadly understood and used efficiently. Throughout the discussion, speakers stressed that legal frameworks alone are insufficient: proactive enforcement, civil society participation, and collective action by journalists are essential to translate laws into meaningful protections.



Tetiana Zhukova from the human rights organization ZMINA
Credits: Sam Glazier

SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW: UKRAINE

Overview

During her introduction, Katia Mierzejewska, Communications and Media Officer at ARTICLE 19 Europe, spoke about the crucial importance of the work done by journalists during wartime. They document what is happening on the battlefield and among civilians, confront propaganda by bringing information to international audiences and gather evidence for future accountability. This makes them primary targets of the Russian aggressor.

The moderator then introduced the speakers: journalist Inna Varenytsia, who has reported from Ukraine's front lines for years and survived direct attacks, and Tetiana Zhukova from the human rights organization ZMINA, which documents international crimes against civilians, including journalists, in Russian-occupied areas.

Journalism in wartime

Inna Varenytsia, who has covered the war in Ukraine since 2014, described the evolution of access to occupied territories that has happened since. Early in the conflict, Ukrainian and international journalists could still report from occupied areas, though increasingly under surveillance and restrictions. By 2017, all independent journalists were banned. Varenytsia explained how media outlets allowed into occupied territories today do so only under strict escort and censorship, making genuine independent reporting practically impossible.

Ukrainian journalists, she stressed, face even greater risks. According to Inna, being Ukrainian is itself treated as a crime by Russian forces. Varenytsia gave the example of Viktoria Roshchyna, a journalist who was abducted, tortured, and who then died in Russian captivity.

Inna detailed how she herself now works as a freelancer, which allows her to collaborate with various media outlets, combining frontline reporting, long-term investigations, collaboration with international media, as well as working with the human rights defenders and lawyers in collecting facts and evidence of war crimes. At the same time, the journalist highlighted the lack of institutional protection for freelancers, especially after the killing of her former husband, photographer Maks Levin, whose disappearance and death exposed the absence of mechanisms to help families locate or support detained journalists.

She concluded by describing the expanding physical danger: drone kill zones have grown from 5 to 40 km from the front, so "physical threat is not only a threat when you are on the front line, and the front line comes closer and closer." Varenytsia herself experienced attacks: thus, a drone struck a car next to her rented flat in Kramatorsk; another drone struck her car while she was documenting the humanitarian situation in Pokrovsk. Two days later, she continued, another car marked "evacuation" was attacked and a British volunteer lost his limbs, proving that civilians are also indiscriminate targets for the Russians.

In conclusion, the speaker warned that freelancers face even greater risks than others: they are often forced to work without having insurance, safety structures, or support if injured or killed. Varenytsia expressed the urgent need for funds to support freelance journalists in Ukraine, as the current conditions are unsustainable.

Human rights violations and crimes against Ukrainian journalists

Tetiana Zhukova explained that her organisation ZMINA reports on human rights in Ukraine and offers support to Ukrainian media outlets with funding and training. Since 2014, with the occupation of Crimea,

Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine, they have started documenting human rights violations and crimes committed against civilians, including journalists, media representatives, activists and peaceful protesters.

Zhukova outlined how Russia has developed a policy of persecution in occupied territories since 2014, which has involved website blocking, raids, administrative charges, abductions, long prison sentences on fabricated accusations of extremism or espionage, torture, and killings. After 2022, these practices have spread and intensified dramatically.

She explained how Russia has shut down independent media in Crimea and other occupied areas, turning the territories into isolated information bubbles where Ukrainian media, social networks, and international platforms are blocked – only Russian propaganda is freely available. Cyberattacks, seizure of media towers, and drone strikes on newsrooms, including a recent attack on Suspilne in Kherson have now become routine.

The speaker described in detail the dire conditions Ukrainian journalists face in Russian captivity: starvation, beatings, denial of medical care, prolonged solitary confinement, and repeated sentencing even after terms are served. She recounted cases such as that of a Crimean citizen journalist, former nurse Iryna Danylovych, who was abducted, tortured, and left without medical care until she lost hearing in her left ear; and numerous others who remain imprisoned, including 26 Ukrainian journalists still held by Russia. She noted the high death toll of journalists in Ukraine. Russia, she said, treats the word “PRESS” as a target, “like a red cape for a bull”.

In her closing remarks, Mierzejewska stressed that without journalists like Inna, the world would know little about the reality of Russia’s war in Ukraine, and without documentation by groups like ZMINA, these crimes would remain hidden. She called for continued solidarity, protection, and recognition of immense risks Ukrainian journalists take daily.



Flutura Kusari, Senior Legal Advisor at the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF)
Credits: Sam Glazier

PANEL 5: THE AUTHORITARIAN PLAYBOOK. FOREIGN AGENT LAWS IN THE EU'S SHADOW

Overview

The panel, moderated by Flutura Kusari, Senior Legal Advisor at the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), explored how "foreign agent" legislation, pioneered in Russia and now replicated in parts of Europe, is becoming a central tool in the authoritarian playbook for suppressing independent journalism. In Hungary, Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska), and Serbia, governments deploy a combination of hostile narratives and legal harassment to label critical journalists as foreign-controlled threats to national sovereignty.

Formally justified as measures to increase transparency, these laws' real purpose, as panelists elaborated, is to delegitimise independent voices and dismantle independent media ecosystem.

The participants of this last panel included Tamás Bodoky, Journalist, Editor and Publisher at Hungarian media outlet Atlatszo.hu, Lia Chakhunashvili, Executive Director of the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, Ivana Korajlić, Executive Director at Transparency International in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Dragana Obradovic, Director of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) in Serbia.

Hungary: A decade-long campaign to criminalise foreign funding

Tamás Bodoky began by introducing his organisation, a mid-sized Hungarian non-profit media outlet partly funded by its audience and partly by international grants and donations. The latter makes it a perfect target for the "foreign agent" stigmatising narrative perpetuated by the state, according to Bodoky.

The speaker described how the Hungarian government has spent over ten years building the narrative that independent media supported by international grants represent "foreign meddling." After consolidating domestic media control through ownership takeovers and state advertising, the Orbán government systematically stigmatised outlets dependent on international donors - an unavoidable consequence of the government itself drying up all internal funding channels.

From 2014 onward, pro-government media and GONGOs (government-operated non-governmental organisations, or pseudo-NGOs created by the government itself) orchestrated smear campaigns that accused independent journalists of espionage, undermining national sovereignty, and serving "Soros networks." Bodoky described being personally targeted in televised attacks claiming that he was "conspiring in Brussels" - just because of a conference he attended there. The creation of the Sovereignty Protection Office (SPO) in 2023 escalated this pressure into the realm of state procedure: the SPO initiated investigations into Transparency International Hungary and Atlatszo, producing fabricated "evidence" that "proved" they were spies, and circulating disinformation as sponsored fake content on social media.

While the SPO initially had no sanctioning powers, a new bill, ironically titled "The Transparency in Public Life Act," would allow it to blacklist organisations it defines as harmful. Blacklisted groups would be banned from receiving foreign funds or tax-deductible donations, and would be treated similarly to extremist entities. Although the bill was unexpectedly postponed in mid-2025, Bodoky expects that its adoption remains very likely.

Georgia: FARA and a Repressive Legal Ecosystem

Lia Chakhnunashvili situated Georgia's new Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) within a broader structure of authoritarian legalism assembled by the ruling Georgian Dream government. Over the past three years, the ruling party has constructed a web of restrictive laws that suffocate civic space, FARA only being one of them.

Parallel legislation already allows authorities to block foreign funding for broadcasters, monitor bank accounts, and demand government approval for any foreign-funded grant. Small community radios have recently been threatened with fines or court action for failing to terminate foreign funding contracts, explained the speaker. According to Chakhunashvili, the Anti-Corruption Bureau has initiated sweeping investigations into more than 60 NGOs and four media outlets, demanding detailed financial documentation within unrealistic deadlines.

Even before FARA is fully implemented, NGOs, including the ones which support media outlets in Georgia, face criminal accusations such as "sabotage," "assisting hostile organisations," and "mobilising finances against the constitutional order," with a possibility of receiving prison sentences of up to 15 years. Bank accounts of several CSOs have been frozen on the basis of trivial expenditures, such as purchasing raincoats and masks for staff who were monitoring protests during police violence. Many groups have already suspended or paused their activities, unable to function legally without accepting the "foreign agent" label.

Chakhnunashvili stressed that the Georgian law is a verbatim translation of the 1938 US FARA, but is entirely stripped of all legal safeguards developed through decades of judicial oversight in the American context, hence it works very differently in practice. In Georgia's political environment that is lacking independent courts and is dominated by anti-Western rhetoric, the law's vague definitions of "political activity" and "foreign interest" would provide authorities with wide discretion to criminalise dissent and significantly increase control.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Repiblika Srpska: A long-standing tool of political repression

Ivana Korajlić explained that Republika Srpska's version of the foreign agent law, although temporarily blocked by the state-level Constitutional Court, remains a looming threat. Its sponsor, Milorad Dodik, who has spent nearly two decades rotating between the offices of president and prime minister in Republika Srpska, has been all this time targeting independent media and CSOs, publicly labeling them as spies, traitors, and "enemies of the state." Lists of alleged enemies have been circulated for years, and hostile narratives are embedded in public discourse.

The proposed discriminatory law would not only require registration and labeling of foreign-funded entities; it would also ban all advocacy activities that could "influence public officials." Violations could ultimately lead to organisational shutdowns. Since many independent media in Republika Srpska are non-profit and dependent on international funding, the law would effectively eliminate the remaining watchdog press, according to Korajlić.

A more general crackdown accompanied the law's introduction: the government re-criminalised defamation, proposed laws enabling police surveillance of "threats to constitutional order," and propelled stigmatisation campaigns around U.S. funding. Police investigations were announced against recipients of American grants, and state-friendly actors, including self-proclaimed "investigators" from abroad, were used to legitimise these conspiracy narratives. Even with the law currently suspended, authorities continue to prepare bylaws for enforcement; according to the speaker, this leaves civil society operating under constant threat.

Serbia: Pending legislation, preemptive repressions

Dragana Obradović explained that Serbia's proposed Law on the Register of Agents of Foreign Interests sits in parliament and can be activated at any time; it was submitted by a minor but pro-Russian party that is part of the the ruling government.

At the same time, Serbian authorities have orchestrated police raids on five major beneficiaries of USAID funding, confiscating their documentation from the past five years. The absence of formal charges suggests that the raids' main purpose is intimidation and leaking of financial data to feed into public smear campaigns targeting critical voices, according to Obradović.

Definitions in the Serbian draft law are intentionally made very ambiguous and hence quite broad in their reach, said the speaker. NGOs can be labeled "agents of foreign influence" for receiving foreign support or engaging in political or advocacy-related activities. Obradović also pointed out a concerning lack of solidarity within the broader corpus of Serbian civil society, with some groups not grasping the law's implications for the civil society as a whole.

At the same time, the government is rapidly implementing other legal changes that directly impact protests, critical journalism, and digital rights. New criminal offenses punish road blockades, sharing information about protests, or even publicising events that might involve civil disobedience. Proposed cybercrime amendments require proving intent behind "malicious software," making digital investigations harder and increasing prosecutorial discretion. These parallel reforms, the speaker concluded, demonstrate that the foreign agent law, though not yet enacted, represents only a part of a larger, and already ongoing, authoritarian slide in Serbia.

Additional analysis by Mamuka Andguladze

Impact of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence on Media Freedom in Georgia

Introduction

Since 2024, the Georgian Dream government has adopted around twenty laws or amendments to existing legislation, negatively impacting free speech and media freedom, among other rights. The most notorious amendments include the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence as well as the Foreign Agents Registration Act, along with amendments to laws on broadcasting, free speech, and expression, grants, etc. This report provides a focused review of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence. However, it's crucial to understand that this law does not operate in isolation, nor should its impact be assessed separately from the broader legislative assault on media and civil society. These laws work together to create a repressive environment that has further deteriorated the media landscape, pushing independent outlets to the brink of collapse.

This text offers a targeted analysis to help readers understand the specific threats posed by this particular law, while acknowledging that the full picture requires examining the cumulative effect of all these measures combined.

In May 2024, Georgia's Parliament passed the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, requiring any organisation that gets more than 20% of its funding from abroad to register as an entity "pursuing the interests of a foreign power." The government frames this as a transparency measure, but it has triggered

fierce opposition from journalists, civil society groups, and European institutions who see it as a threat to press freedom and democracy itself.

Critics point out that the law looks suspiciously like the "foreign agent" laws used in Russia and other authoritarian states-not to inform the public, but to control it. The assessment of independent stakeholders indicated that the law negatively affects media organisations on the ground.

Scope

The law casts a remarkably wide spectrum. It applies to TV and radio stations, newspapers, and online media - basically anyone doing journalism in Georgia. If you get one-fifth of your annual budget from a "foreign power," you have to register with the Ministry of Justice. The term "foreign power" doesn't just mean foreign governments. It means any individual who isn't a Georgian citizen or any organisation registered outside Georgia. A donation from a Georgian expat living in Berlin? That counts. A partnership with an international journalism training program? That counts too.

Once you're labeled as a foreign-funded organisation, you have to file detailed public reports showing exactly where the financial resources come from and where it goes. All of this gets posted on a government website for everyone to see. Miss the deadline or refuse to register? You're looking at fines starting at 25,000 GEL (around 7900 EUR)-and they go up from there. The Ministry of Justice can also show up at any time to dig through your files or demand financial records, even if you haven't registered yet. Furthermore, the law encompasses personal data, with particular emphasis on special categories of personal data. The regulatory framework applies not only to legal entities but also to natural persons, who bear the legal obligation to submit the requisite information concerning data handling. Non-compliance with this requirement carries a monetary sanction of 5,000 GEL (around 1500 EUR)

Paperwork Nightmare

The majority of independent media outlets are already running on shoestring budgets. To comply with the legal requirement, they have to hire people just to handle the bureaucracy: tracking every donation, filing annual declarations, and keeping records in case the Ministry decides to audit them.

Then there's the surveillance aspect. The Ministry can launch an investigation based on anonymous tips. You might be doing nothing wrong, but someone files a complaint, and suddenly you're under scrutiny. That kind of uncertainty makes people cautious. Maybe you think twice before taking that grant. Maybe you soften your coverage of a sensitive topic. That's self-censorship, and it's exactly what laws like this tend to produce.

As the Venice Commission put it in their May 2024 review, transparency measures become a problem when their practical effect is to stigmatise and restrict legitimate civic and media activity rather than illuminate it.

Financial and Reputational Damage

The fines alone could sink a small outlet. And paying the fine doesn't release you from the responsibility - you still have to register. So organisations can find themselves in a spiral: they can't afford the fine, but they also can't afford to comply, and the penalties keep piling up until they shut down.

But the financial pressure is only part of it. Being officially labeled as an organisation "pursuing the interests of a foreign power" is poison for your credibility. In Georgia's polarised political environment, that label becomes a weapon. Government officials and pro-government media can wave it around to dismiss anything you report as "foreign propaganda." Even if your journalism is solid, the stigma sticks.

Both the Venice Commission and the OSCE have said this kind of language violates international human rights standards. The European Commission's 2024 report on Georgia was blunt: the law "negatively affects the ability of the media to operate freely and independently."

Threatening Media Diversity

Georgia's independent media survives on international funding because there aren't many alternatives. Domestic businesses are often reluctant to support outlets that criticise the government-they worry about losing contracts or facing official retaliation. International grants from foundations and press-freedom organisations have filled that gap, keeping investigative journalism alive and ensuring a range of voices in the public square.

This law puts that entire ecosystem at risk. Some outlets might refuse foreign funding to avoid the stigma and the hassle. Some international donors are already pulling back because they don't want to expose their Georgian partners to fines and harassment. Fewer independent outlets mean fewer investigations, less scrutiny of power, and a narrower public conversation.

There's also the chilling effect on journalists themselves. If taking foreign funding makes you a target, you start avoiding stories that might draw attention. You go easier on government corruption. You steer clear of politically sensitive investigations. Over time, the media stops functioning as a check on power-which is exactly what a healthy democracy needs it to be.

International Criticism

The international response has been overwhelmingly negative. The Venice Commission called the law incompatible with European human rights standards and urged Georgia to repeal it. The OSCE said the same goals could be achieved without such heavy-handed measures. The European Union warned that the law could derail Georgia's hopes of joining the EU.

Inside Georgia, the reaction was intense. Thousands of people took to the streets in Tbilisi after the law was passed. For many Georgians, the law feels like a copy of Russia's notorious "foreign agents" law, which has been used to crush dissent and close down independent organisations. The comparison isn't subtle, and it's not lost on anyone: this looks like democratic backsliding, plain and simple.

Conclusion

Transparency in public life is a worthy goal. Knowing who funds media organisations can help the public evaluate what they're reading. But this law isn't really about transparency. The broad definitions, the invasive monitoring, the steep fines, the stigmatising labels-all of it adds up to something that looks more like control than openness. For a country that has long said it wants to join Europe and strengthen its democracy, this is a critical moment.*

**the analysis was prepared in addition to the conference materials*



MEDIA FREEDOM
RAPID RESPONSE