

Mission project: How to help journalists under threat

What is the problem?

Independent media stand and fall with their journalists. If anti-democratic actors manage to intimidate journalists and threaten their financial security or even their physical integrity, journalists face an impossible choice. Intimidatory actions such as lawsuits and online threats are becoming more common across the EU Member States and put journalists under pressure to stop reporting. The assassinations of investigative journalists Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta and Ján Kuciak alongside his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in Slovakia show how far criminal actors tied to corrupt politicians are willing to go when trying to shut down critical voices in the media.

What is the solution?

One best-practice means of protecting journalists is already in place. In the Netherlands, PersVeilig (Press Safe) – a joint initiative of journalists, the police and public prosecutors – has developed a special protocol that ensures that prosecutors give police reports of violence against journalists high priority and provides for strong penalties for convicted perpetrators. In addition, financial and legal support structures should be developed to assist journalists and media companies faced with so-called ‘strategic lawsuits against public participation’ (SLAPP actions).

MEPs should champion programmes such as PersVeilig that bring journalists together with the police and prosecutors to ensure swift and vigorous protection of journalists facing intimidation and threats.

The EU Commission should review whether existing EU funds and programmes can be repurposed for legal aid schemes against SLAPP suits. MEPs should advocate the introduction of legislative limits to amounts in dispute for such suits to avoid the financial ruin of small-scale media outlets and journalists.

How does it affect Europeans?

Intimidating journalists is among the first steps undemocratic actors use to undermine democracy. If intimidation, physical threats and online threats enjoy impunity, any public person – whether politicians or civil society actors – is at risk. Europe has an obligation to uphold the rule of law and vigorously prosecute such actions in order to preserve the basis for democratic activity: freedom of speech and media without fear of personal attacks.

What does it cost?

Programmes such as PersVeilig are financially very effective if set up as joint initiatives with existing institutions. Financial and legal aid schemes are manageable cost-wise and highly effective in protecting media companies from intimidation and financial ruin.

Would you like more detailed information about this policy?

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