



PLATFORM TO PROMOTE THE PROTECTION OF JOURNALISM AND SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS

Reply by the Government of Finland to the platform alert concerning the conviction of journalist Johanna Vehkoo

5 June 2019

Freedom of expression is a basic prerequisite for a free and democratic society. It is a necessary precondition for the realisation of transparency and responsibility, which in turn are essential for promoting and protecting human rights. The Constitution of Finland safeguards everyone's right to express, disseminate and receive information, opinions and other communications without prior prevention by anyone. This provision has been consistently clarified by legislation, e.g. the Act on the Exercise of Freedom of Expression in Mass Media, and by policy recommendations and instructions.

By international standards, Finland offers top-rank freedom of expression. Finland is currently ranked second in the World Press Freedom Index by *Reporters Without Borders*, thanks to access to information of public authorities, the high standard of source protection and the efforts to provide all citizens with a rapid web connection. There is no advance censorship, but the use of the freedom of expression may be subject to intervention retrospectively, if a published communication proves unlawful.

Finland promotes press freedom also internationally and is an active member of the intergovernmental Group of Friends on Safety of Journalists. Permitting the media to work as independently and diversely as possible will be important also in future, to maintain the high standard of freedom of press. To ensure equality it is vital to protect the rights of those who, because of e.g. barriers to using information technology, have more limited opportunities to use their freedom of expression.

The Union of Journalists is very strong in Finland, with over 15,000 members covering more than 90% of working journalists, including freelancers. The Union provides an active and inclusive professional community, training, protection against pressure, and decent working conditions, thus making it much more difficult for an outsider to corrupt a journalist or a journalist to work without any peer review at all. The Union (together with specialised journalists' associations) also provides professional support and legal help. The Union has also been active in the watchdog role defending freedom of expression against attempts to limit press freedom.



According to the *International Press Institute's* recent analysis, Finnish journalists are increasingly subject to online harassment. Finland's top media houses have joined with the Union of Journalists to create a fund to support journalists who find themselves subject to persecution or threats. The new fund is intended to assist journalists with legal costs, for example, in seeking redress in courts of law.

On 12 April 2019 the District Court of Oulu convicted journalist *Johanna Vehkoo* of defamation and sentenced her to 15 day fines. In Finland, the amount of a day fine is calculated on the basis of a person's income. Ms Vehkoo appealed the judgment on 13 May 2019. The case is currently pending before the Court of Appeal, thus the judgment on the basis which the alert was made is not yet legally valid.

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