Minutes of the meeting

Annual thematic conference: *Protection of Journalists- a multistakeholder dialogue*

Organised within the framework of the Council of Europe's [Campaign for the Safety of Journalists – Journalists Matter](#), the conference *Protection of Journalists- a multistakeholder dialogue* took place on 29-30 October 2024*,* in Strasbourg.

In line with the priorities of the Lithuanian presidency to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and supported by the Chairmanship of the Group of friends for the media freedom and safety of journalists in Strasbourg, the event gathered representatives from law enforcement, media, civil society, international organisations, governments and Council of Europe bodies to address urgent issues affecting journalist safety. As part of the Journalists Matter Campaign, this event was focused on practical solutions and frameworks to protect journalists facing threats in line with the **Protection pillar** of the [Recommendation CM/Rec(2016)4](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors.

Journalists Matter Campaign progress

The participants were informed about the progress both in member States and activities at Council of Europe level.

- Since its launch in 2023, the Campaign recorded progress across Council of Europe's member states. 38 Focal points were appointed by member States out of 46.
- There are 23 Campaign committees/ coordination structures or other platforms of inter-institutional dialogue, both formal and informal, out of which 15 since the launch of the Campaign. 7 countries have National Action plans for the safety of journalists, 2 out of which adopted since the launch of the Campaign. Several more countries reported the intention to work on action plans as well.
- During 2024, the year dedicated to the Protection pillar of the Recommendation 2016, a [series of activities](#) focusing on concrete measures of immediate protection of the safety of journalists took place, both in Strasbourg and in member States. A data base [mapping initiatives on journalists' safety across Europe](#) has also been created on the [Campaign webpage](#) and is being constantly enriched with further information and good practices. The information coming from member States is regularly updated under the [National Chapters](#) of the Campaign.

Challenges and issues raised

The conference served as a platform for participants to address the evolving landscape of threats, particularly the increase in online and offline harassment, mistrust, and attacks on journalists covering polarised subjects and rallies.

- Attacks and intimidation during public demonstrations have increased, impacting journalists' ability to report freely and safely, affecting press freedom and public access to information, both of which are essential for democratic societies.
- The rise of digital threats, harassment, and surveillance present significant challenges to journalists' safety. Participants highlighted the real-world consequences of online attacks, as online harassment sometimes escalates into offline threats. Widespread disinformation Campaigns targeting journalists also undermine credibility and foster public distrust.

- The decline of local press contributes to lower public participation in democratic debates, resulting in more polarised societies. This underscores the need for media pluralism and sustainable solutions for local media outlets.
- Women journalists and journalists belonging to other vulnerable groups, including LGBTQI+ and minority journalists, face additional, often more severe threats, necessitating dedicated protection for these groups.
- Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) were discussed as a significant, although non-violent threat. Costly legal battles can drain journalists' resources, affecting their ability to report freely and having a considerable chilling effect, both on individual journalists and more widely on the effective exercise of the journalistic profession. The need for a holistic, collaborative approach to mitigate these threats was emphasised.
- Mistrust between actors involved in journalists' protection remains a barrier to collaboration, particularly in high-risk events, but also in designing protection policies and measures. Addressing this gap in understanding is critical for improving conditions for journalists in the field.
- A recurring challenge lies in balancing the prosecution of violent attackers with the need to protect journalists' data.
- Participants heard testimonies related to confrontations in demonstrations of far-right groups, resulting often in harassment and attacks against journalists and which continues even after the events. This "chilling effect" discourages some journalists from covering contentious areas, threatening the free flow of information. In sufficient and/or inadequate training for law enforcement agencies was also cited as contributing to a worrying trend of impunity.

Applicable standards and legal frameworks

The conference reviewed essential legal standards and frameworks concerning journalists' safety. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) case law affirms journalists' "public watchdog" role, especially concerning freedom of expression. Member states have positive obligations to protect journalists and enable their safe operation. This is even more important when journalists are covering public interest issues.

The Council of Europe Recommendation (2016)4 emphasises specific protection measures, such as: hotlines, dedicated contact points, and specialised training to address threats more effectively. Member states are encouraged to adopt measures enabling journalists to work in a safe environment and thereby recognising journalists' critical role in democracy. The Council of Europe's *How to Protect Journalists and Other Media Actors* Pocket Guide, developed under the *Journalists Matter* Campaign, was noted as a resource for member states, providing self-assessment tools and best practices.

A critical focus of discussions was the misuse of defamation laws and other legal tools to target journalists, often leading to self-censorship. Excessive or arbitrary application of such laws can create a "chilling effect," and SLAPPs were a significant concern. Initiatives to prevent SLAPPs from deterring journalists were discussed, including the UK's pioneering anti-SLAPPs framework.

Media freedom rapporteurs of The Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) and Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe underscored the importance of aligning member state actions with Council standards on media freedom and journalist safety. Local and regional authorities were recognised as key players in protecting media freedom and promoting pluralism.

JOURNALISTS MATTER
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Building on existing efforts and joining forces with International Partner Organisations

The Conference exchanges showed that the work carried out within the framework of the Council of Europe Campaign in member States is anchored in a global momentum confirmed by ongoing actions of international organisations to protect journalists through policy initiatives, monitoring, and support resources.

The Campaign's initial focus on the Protection Pillar of the [Recommendation CM/Rec(2016)4 on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors](#) aligns with the European Union's own timeline for member States to report on implementing the European Commission's [2021/1534 Recommendationon ensuring the protection, safety and empowerment of journalists and other media professionals in the European Union](#).

Finally**,** the Campaign looks for coordinated action and synergies with the OSCE Representative on Media Freedom and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

The [European Commission's Media Freedom Act](#) and recent works aim at protect democracy in election period, counter disinformation and protect media and journalists as a priority.

[UNESCO](#) encourages multistakeholder plans for the safety of journalists and monitoring efforts and underscores the importance of data collection in revealing patterns of violence and impunity, advocating for robust accountability and a reinforced support to the protection of media professionals. Complementing these efforts, the [OSCE](#) provides field-based guidance through a multistakeholder approach encourages cooperation among national focal points within OSCE initiatives and developed a [toolbox](#) of existing practices on journalists' safety in OSCE member States.

Finally, the Journalists Matter Campaign fully aligns with with the commitments of the [UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity](#).

Participants highlighted the importance of coordinated action and mutual reinforcement of efforts towards increased journalists' safety as part of this momentum.

Operational measures of protection, domestic practices and other support initiatives

Various multistakeholder initiatives by civil society and member states to protect journalists were discussed, showcasing good practices.

- In some member States, such as Austria or Ireland, dedicated **media contact points** have been established in the form of contact officers during public demonstrations to act as **liaison between police and journalists**. The officers are expected to facilitate communication, reduce misunderstandings and provide support to journalists, ensuring that they can report safely even in high-tensions environments.
- **Measures involving law enforcement** include 24/7 protection services, anonymisation of the journalist victim of aggression in the reporting process, and personal protection at different level. As an example, the Netherlands put in place a **coordination mechanism** involving police, media associations, and legal bodies through active support mechanisms and prioritization of protection to ensure journalist safety via the [PersVeilig](#) project. Similarly, Italy's police force operates a system to classify and respond to threats based on severity, currently providing **direct protection** for a select number of high-risk journalists.

- In Germany, **civil society organisations** have mobilised **volunteer escorts for journalists** covering high-risk events, particularly protests with right-wing affiliations. The volunteers involved in the [Between the Lines initiative](#) from Saxony help de-escalate tense situations, although questions remain about their safety and the broader impact of citizen-led protective measures compared to formal law enforcement involvement.

- **Training programs** have been implemented in certain member States to bridge gaps between law enforcement and journalists, encouraging cooperation and reducing mistrust. These initiatives focus on the **responsibilities and rights of both parties**. Several resources such as workshops on first aid, capacity building in risk situation, training on how to face SLAPPs and continue investigation, cyber-harassment, natural disasters and emergency communications, practice on social media and dissemination of information and editing of shocking graphic contents are being proposed by several local initiatives.

- Several broadcasters, like Sweden's public radio network, have developed **comprehensive safety protocols for journalists**, emphasising risk assessments, planning, and physical security trainings. This approach underscores an **employer's responsibility** for the safety of their journalists in the field. However, **psychological support and training on resilience** are still only emerging, with gaps in preparation for stress and trauma associated with difficult reporting conditions.

- Additionally, **support measures from the employers and media organisations** have been presented, as in cases where media companies and national unions of journalists cover costs related to health services, relocation or legal proceedings for journalists both employees and freelancers. A [code of conduct](#) **for media houses** was developed by journalist and advisory organizations in Germany, including DJV and DJU in Ver.di, recommending each media organization to designate a contact person for journalists facing threats, regardless of employment status. This contact should provide information on legal, psychological, psychosocial, and financial support options and assist journalists until their safety is assured.

- Certain of the above mentioned measures are part of the **National Action Plans** for the safety of journalists implemented in some member States (Sweden, UK, Switzerland, Croatia, etc.). Ukraine, despite the ongoing war also developed a National Action Plan under the Journalists Matter Campaign and put in place various measures or protection, despite the martial law situation.

- **Digital attacks** against journalists often include **harassment** Campaigns tied to broader issues like LGBTQ+ rights, with perpetrators frequently hiding behind anonymous accounts. Many journalists do not report these attacks due to low expectations of legal consequences, underscoring the **need for stronger digital safeguards and accountability mechanisms**.

- National multistakeholder approaches, such as [Ireland](#)'s Media Engagement Group, are emerging to address online threats and provide media workers with a **mechanism to report incidents and receive support**.

- Furthermore, **collaborations with tech platforms** aim at enhancing online safety through stronger **cyber security protocols and anti-harassment and anti cyber attacks measures**. In this sense, the Council of Europe invited to make use of its [Digital partnership](#) with the private sector: Cloudflare, one of the partners proposed solutions against cyber attacks through its [Galileo Project](#), offering free protection to journalists, human rights activists and other partners.

- **Exiled journalists** face transnational threats, often perpetrated by their home countries through legal harassment or intimidation tactics. Belarus and Russia have been notable in employing **extreme measures to silence journalists abroad**, from defamation and arbitrary detention to punitive psychiatry.

- Finally, a strong accent was put on **journalists covering conflict zones** who face a complex set of threats, including physical danger, digital threats, and state repression. Ukrainian journalists,

for example, have faced severe restrictions, including detentions and the suppression of independent information by occupying forces. International organizations are increasingly involved in training journalists for conflict environments, covering survival techniques, first aid, and navigating disinformation. Examples of national measures to train journalists covering conflict areas have been provided (Greece, Romania, Sweden, etc.).

- **Local media outlets** often remain the only source of information in conflict areas, highlighting the critical need for their protection under international law. However, without a unified international framework to ensure the swift **release of detained journalists**, these efforts face limitations. Additional **calls were made for support to Ukrainian journalists**, who are targeted by aggression aimed at controlling narratives.

- As part of the conference, a **photo exhibition** "Executed Free Speech" by Ukrainian photographer Yevhen Zinchenko organised in cooperation with the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine called on prosecution of crimes against journalists killed or held in captivity by Russia.

- This first day of the conference concluded with the **screening of the Oscar winning documentary by Pulitzer Prize, "20 days in Mariupol"** - a powerful reminder of the critical role of journalists to inform the public amid chaos and war at great personal risk.

Conclusion

The conference concluded reaffirming ~~of~~ the collective responsibility to protect journalists and uphold media freedom as a cornerstone of democracy. Participants acknowledged the efforts undertaken during this year dedicated to the protection of journalists and agreed on the importance of continued, coordinated, multistakeholder approaches involving law enforcement, civil society, public authorities and media professionals alongside with gender and other specific initiatives as part of a broader actions to enhance journalist safety.

Participants praised and emphasised the value of national action plans tailored to country-specific challenges, with a focus on fostering trust and cooperation among all parties.

High interest was expressed in continuing exchanges on good practices and lessons learned, reinforcing the importance of ongoing dialogue to adapt and implement effective protective measures.

The next annual thematic conference under the Journalists Matter Campaign, focused on the Prosecution pillar of the 2016 Recommendation will take pace in Luxembourg, under the presidency of the country to the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, on 29-30 April 2025.