



# JOURNALISTS MATTER

Council of Europe Campaign for the Safety of Journalists

## Minutes of the meeting

### Seminar: *The Role of the police in the protection of the safety of journalists*

26-27 September 2024, Strasbourg

Organised within the framework of the Council of Europe's [Campaign for the Safety of Journalists – Journalists Matter](#), the seminar *The Role of the Police in the Protection of the Safety of Journalists* took place on 26-27 September 2024.

It explored one of the main areas of concrete support action as highlighted under 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, and namely the role of the police in the protection of journalists in particular during demonstrations and public events.

The event brought together a diverse group of participants from various countries. It was supported by Germany in commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the Council of Europe, coinciding with the 75th anniversary of the Fundamental Law of the Federal Republic of Germany and the founding of the German Council of the European Movement.

## Issues raised

The seminar covered a **range of challenges to journalist safety**, focusing on both longstanding and emerging threats.

- Journalists continue to face **significant risks**, such as physical attacks, threats, harassment, imprisonment, censorship, and surveillance.
- The **digital era** has introduced **additional threats** like **online harassment, illegal surveillance, and disinformation**, making the safety landscape more complex for media professionals. Particularly the **growing anti-press sentiment** fueled inter alia by social media algorithms was addressed. Participants stressed the need for joint efforts between law enforcement and digital platforms to protect journalists online.
- The discussions also highlighted **non-violent threats** like **Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)** which require a multi-faceted approach. This approach should include better collaboration between political authorities, law enforcement, and media organisations to ensure prompt responses to these threats.
- A significant part of the seminar focused on **the role of police in protecting journalists during public demonstrations**. Emphasis was placed on the need for clear guidelines on journalist identification and specialised police training, especially in high-risk situations. Ensuring the safety of journalists during demonstrations is critical, as these events often pose increased risks, including politically motivated attacks. Challenges were noted regarding the complexity of protecting journalists during violent demonstrations, where certain police actions may be required to maintain order. This can make it difficult to guarantee journalist safety.

- **Mutual mistrust between journalists and police:** This issue was highlighted as a significant barrier to effective collaboration. Improved awareness among journalists about available communication channels with the police are a must in order to enhance collaboration and ensure better protection during public events.
- **Gaps in data and legal frameworks:** A lack of comprehensive data on violence against journalists makes it difficult to address safety issues effectively. There is also a need for legal legislation to also specifically address threats based on race, gender, or religion, and related legal and practical responses to such cases.
- **Specialised protection for vulnerable journalists:** targeted protection for marginalized groups of journalists (such as minority or LGBTQI+ ) during protests is necessary to ensure the safety of particularly vulnerable media professionals.
- **Importance of coordinated national action plans, policies or strategies in the field:** The need and not always an easy task to bring together various stakeholders, including media organisations, law enforcement, and government bodies, was a common theme.
- A key theme of the discussions was **the need for a coordinated approach** that involves law enforcement, political institutions, and civil society to ensure the safety of journalists and reinforce **public trust in quality journalism**.
- The event offered also the possibility of direct testimonies from some journalists, who discussed mutual mistrust between journalists and law enforcement, which is exacerbated by a **lack of resources for police protection** and difficulty in identifying online threats. Furthermore, **challenges posed by insufficient political will** to protect journalists can lead to increased self-censorship and a culture of impunity.
- The importance of **capacity-building for law enforcement** and also for judges in cases involving journalists' safety was raised, as well as the need of **increased support for local press**, which is particularly vulnerable to pressure and attacks.

Overall, participants emphasized the importance of collaboration between law enforcement and journalists, especially due to the intersection of roles during fieldwork and public events. This cooperation is crucial for safeguarding journalists' safety while maintaining public order and the public's right to access information.

### **Applicable standards and legal frameworks**

The seminar also covered essential legal frameworks and standards for protecting journalists' safety. Discussions included the positive obligations of states under European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) [case law](#), particularly regarding freedom of expression and the safety of journalists. Member States have a duty to adopt positive measures for journalist protection, given their role as public watchdogs. It was highlighted that the Court evaluates violations of the European Convention for Human Rights, even if journalists do not wear outside identification signs for safety reasons.

The Council of Europe's *How to protect journalists and other media actors* [Pocket Guide](#), developed under the *Journalists Matter Campaign* was introduced as a resource for member states, providing self-assessment tools and best practices.

Consequently, participants discussed the continued relevance of the [Recommendation \(2016\)4 on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors](#) and its alignment with the ECtHR case law and other international standards. Examples of collaborative efforts such as that of the Council of Europe European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), which resulted in the [Guidelines on freedom and peaceful assembly](#) were presented. The document refers among others, to the right to

report all forms of assembly, the establishment of open lines of communication by the Police forces with the media, the freedom from arbitrary arrests or detention of media actors covering public assemblies, the proportionality of restrictions to media access for restricting areas etc. Additionally, the [European Code of Police Ethics of 2001](#) was referenced and the work of the [Council of Europe Police Network](#) was also presented.

International Partner organisations' tools were also references, such as the [2021/1534 Recommendation of the European Union Commission on ensuring the protection, safety and empowerment of journalists and other media professionals in the European Union](#).

The [ECMPF study on the Police and journalists' interaction](#) highlighted that freelance journalists are particularly vulnerable. A lack of protection for freelancers compared to larger media groups contributes to this issue.

### **Practices from member States**

During the seminar, countries shared various practices aimed at improving the safety of journalists, particularly during public demonstrations and in high-risk situations. These practices are centred around fostering collaboration, providing targeted training, and establishing formal and/or less formal agreements to ensure the safety of media professionals. Key examples included:

- **Austria:** Focused on building mutual understanding between journalists and law enforcement through joint training programmes. Austria has also deployed media contact officers during public events to support journalists, ensuring they can report freely while maintaining safety. These officers serve as points of contact for journalists during demonstrations, helping to facilitate communication and prevent incidents.
- **Germany:** Emphasised specialised safety training for journalists, particularly those covering sensitive events such as right-wing demonstrations. These programmes aim to equip journalists with the skills to navigate high-risk environments. Germany also implemented measures to protect journalists' personal data, reducing the risk of exposure to threats during protests.
- **Croatia:** Presented a formal agreement between the Ministry of Interior and journalist associations, signed in 2023, which sets protocols for police responses during incidents and demonstrations. This agreement ensures protection for all journalists, including freelancers, by establishing clear guidelines for police interactions with media professionals during high-risk events. Croatia also highlighted the importance of a national action plan, coordinated by a committee, to bring together media organisations, governmental institutions, and journalists' associations for effective implementation of safety measures.
- **Ireland:** Showcased the Media Engagement Group (MEG), which operates a 24/7 reporting mechanism. This mechanism provides a centralised point of contact for journalists to report incidents of physical violence or cybercrime. The streamlined reporting process allows for swift responses from law enforcement, leading to successful cases of prosecution and enhanced protection. Ireland also emphasised the role of media liaison officers as crucial in maintaining open lines of communication between journalists and police during public events.
- **Sweden:** Emphasised regular interaction and joint training sessions between media houses and police, fostering a more open and collaborative environment. Sweden's approach includes holding meetings in media facilities to build trust and establish communication frameworks that allow journalists to work freely while maintaining safety. The country also focuses on raising awareness among journalists about available communication channels with the police to improve coordination during public events.

- **The Netherlands** presented the PersVeilig practice, a joint effort between journalists' associations, media organizations, law enforcement, and prosecutors to strengthen journalists' safety. The initiative includes 24/7 protection services, legal and psychological support, and special police guidelines for safeguarding journalists at demonstrations.
- **Norway:** While incidents of violence against journalists are less common, Norway prioritises the safety of vulnerable groups, such as minority and LGBTQI+ journalists. The police provide protective measures during protests, including access to safe zones for journalists to ensure they can report freely while being shielded from potential threats.

Finally, META highlighted efforts to protect journalists online, including products like [Facebook Protect and journalists registration](#). Best practices and resources were shared to help media professionals safeguard against harassment and hacking.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the need for ongoing dialogue and cooperation between journalists and law enforcement was emphasized. The topic will remain a priority throughout the *Journalists Matter Campaign*. The critical importance of recognising gender-specific threats faced by women journalists was also tackled, as well as the importance for law enforcement to remain neutral, especially during politically sensitive periods like elections. Finally, the adaptation of successful practices to different country contexts was encouraged by underscoring the essential role both police and journalists play in maintaining democratic societies.

Participants expressed high interest in having further opportunities to get acquainted with existing standards and practices and in the continuation of such opportunities to share promising practices, concerns, lessons learnt.