The protection of journalists around the world and the European Union’s policy on the matter

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted an own-initiative report by Isabel WISELER-LIMA (EPP, LU) on the protection of journalists around world and the European Union's policy on the matter.

Recent years have shown a decline in press freedom and a growing pattern of physical attacks, harassment, including online, and intimidation aimed at silencing and slandering journalists, in particular war correspondents, investigative journalists working to expose corruption, trafficking, corporate abuse, or wrongdoings of political actors, and journalists reporting on situations in certain totalitarian states or dictatorships.

According to figures published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), 1 668 journalists were murdered worldwide in connection with their work between 2003 and 2022. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 67 journalists were killed worldwide in 2022.

Protecting journalists against violence and intimidation

Recalling that democracy cannot function in the absence of reliable and accessible information both online and offline, Members stressed the need to protect journalists from all types of violence and stressed the importance of protecting the independence of journalists, safeguarding freedom of expression, ensuring media diversity and preserving the fundamental right of every citizen to be informed.

Members condemned all crimes, including physical attacks, kidnappings, torture, intimidation and hate speech, committed against journalists and media professionals worldwide, including within the EU. They also condemned all arbitrary detentions of journalists as well as all pre-trial detentions based on political motives or abusive laws.

Expressing concern about the lack of specific policy or legal frameworks to protect journalists from violence and threats worldwide, Members called on countries around the world to adopt **legislation and measures** to create a legal environment to prevent and prosecute acts of repression against journalists.

The report called on the authorities to draw up **national action plans**, in close collaboration with journalist organisations, to improve the working conditions of journalists. Journalists travelling to conflict zones should be adequately insured. The media should provide journalists with the necessary training, particularly in safety and first aid.

Members called for effective monitoring toolkits to be developed in collaboration with journalists' organisations, and for the European External Action Service (EEAS) to continue to **report** regularly to Parliament on the overall situation regarding media freedom and violations of journalists' rights worldwide.

Media independence, strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs)

The report condemned, in the strongest possible terms, any attempt to silence independent media or undermine their freedom and pluralism and to restrict the public’s access to reliable information via internet shutdowns, illegal and/or disproportionate surveillance, blocking or filtering of online content. In particular, Members condemned attempts to control public service media and deplored the adoption by

some non-EU countries of so-called foreign agent laws. They called on governments to effectively counter abuse and not misuse protective measures to prevent freedom of expression or enable censorship. They also condemned the growing use of surveillance equipment and spyware to monitor, intercept and censor the work of journalists.

The report condemned the use of SLAPPs and called for the Commission's proposal for a directive against SLAPPs against journalists in the EU to cover the external dimension of SLAPPs, in order to protect journalists based in the EU from abusive prosecutions by authorities in non-EU countries.

Members also made the following recommendations:

- the EU should step up its action to protect journalists abroad through the activities of its delegations;

- the EU should encourage the use of media education to improve citizens' and societies' understanding of the societal role played by journalism and promote exchange programmes for journalists. Members reiterated their call for media literacy to be integrated into formal and informal settings, including school curricula;

- measures should be implemented to protect journalists from online and gender-based violence on social media and other digital platforms. Members stressed that women journalists, in particular, are also exposed to sexual harassment and violence;

- the EU Special Representative for Human Rights should make the safety of journalists, media professionals and associated staff one of his main priorities in his relations with the authorities of third countries;

- the EEAS should: (i) put in place an emergency response plan to be implemented by EU delegations, based on a range of protective measures; (ii) develop a structured approach to support journalists facing digital threats; (iii) encourage exchanges of views between law enforcement agencies and journalists in order to allow the latter to freely cover protests or demonstrations in countries hosting an EU delegation.

The Council is invited to impose **targeted sanctions** under the EU's global human rights sanctions regime (‘EU Magnitsky Act’) on individuals and entities committing human rights violations against journalists and media professionals.

Lastly, the Commission and Member States are invited to (i) promote sustainable measures to protect, fund and support media pluralism and independent journalism in all their agreements and partnerships with third countries; (ii) ensure that EU funding programmes are known and accessible to local civil society organisations working for the safety of journalists and their freedom of expression.