

Media freedoms are under threat in the EU and its neighbourhood: What the EU can do

By Beatrice Basaldella for *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (19.05.2015) - On 6th May, Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom and Tuskon, a Turkish business confederation, organised an event in Brussels on media freedoms under threat in the European Union and neighbouring countries. Journalists and press freedom activists expressed alarm over the extent to which control over information and pressures on journalists has spread. The event focused especially on conditions in Turkey and Hungary and on what the EU should and could do inside and outside its borders to promote media freedom.

The first speaker was Sevgi Akarçeşme, a journalist, columnist and blogger for the Zaman news group. In 2014, she said, Turkey saw the worst regression in media freedom in the country's history. Pressure on journalists is a daily phenomenon: "The newsrooms are open air prisons, (...) and the worst crime is insulting [President] Erdoğan." Journalists are routinely jailed and silenced. Social media sites are monitored and severely restricted. Human rights violations are becoming pandemic in Turkey, said Akarçeşme, who is "shocked" by the precision in which they are carried out.

Similar fears were echoed by Attila Mong, an investigative journalist for Atlatszo, an anti-corruption watchdog organisation, and Mertek Media Monitor, that monitors the media in Hungary. Just two years ago, he could not have imagined that the Hungarian media could rival Turkey in its suppression of media freedoms, even though the media environment is quite different between the two countries. Mong believes that the turning point was the constitutional changes that were made in 2010, expanding the powers of incoming Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in several areas, including control of the media. Pro-government ownership and control of the media has the effect of filtering the news that is reported and censoring journalists that are critical toward the government.

Jean Paul Marthoz, EU correspondent for the Committee to Protect Journalists, contended that the EU has a key role to play in promoting media freedoms. For instance, partnership agreements are contingent on a positive review of a country's respect for democracy and human rights. The EU cannot expect commitments and improvements from non-EU countries, he said, if its member states do not respect their own human rights obligations. In the case of Hungary, the EU disposes of legal means, defined by the treaties, to enforce human rights standards within its borders; however, enforcement is weak. Marthoz said that exaggerated attention is given to economic interests in the EU integration process, while the protection of human rights is minimised. Compliance must be enforced even after the country has entered the Union. Democracy cannot be taken for granted, he said. Marthoz believes that a mechanism for monitoring the evolution of democracy in the EU should be created along with clear and enforceable sanctions in cases of non-compliance.

There is still much to be done to strengthen media freedoms within Europe and to protect journalists that are under pressure from their governments and other forces that wish to censor their voices. The EU needs to ensure that binding legal instruments are enforced and that its proclamations do not remain only rhetorical. It can support media democracy movements in countries like Turkey and Hungary. Most importantly, it must promote the democratic values that it claims to be the foundation of its existence.