

Council of Europe chief's Annual Report links attacks on journalists with “democratic backsliding”

11 May 2021, By William Horsley, AEJ Media Freedom Representative

Today the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Marija Pejčinović Burić, issued a stark warning that the increase in violence against journalists, including murders, wrongful imprisonment, and disinformation and smear campaigns, show “a worrying degree of democratic backsliding ” in Europe. Her Annual Report on the State of Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law says that actions taken by governments in response to the coronavirus pandemic have worsened an already troubling situation, creating a danger that Europe’s “democratic culture” will not fully recover.

The Secretary-General’s report cites numerous examples of media freedom alerts published by journalists’ associations and NGOs on the Council of Europe’s Platform to promote the protection of journalism and the safety of journalists. She concludes that what she calls the “epidemic of harassment and violence against journalists” has been compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic and led to “a wave of censorship” and fresh concerns about corruption.

In a chapter in the Report on Freedom of Expression, the Secretary-General also highlights large-scale blocking of websites in a number of states, journalists suffering reprisals for questioning government policies, and the frequent misuse of abusive civil lawsuits intended to “silence critical voices” .

Ms Burić calls on all 47 Council of Europe member States to “return to fundamental democratic principles by restoring the independence of national judiciaries as an impartial arbiter for all citizens, implementing judgements from the European Court of Human Rights, and providing effective legal guarantees for freedom for expression in domestic courts.

The Association of European Journalists is a founding partner of the Platform for the safety of journalists, which was established in 2015 with the approval of member states to serve as an early warning and “rapid response” system against attacks on press freedom. Now 14 leading European freedom of expression and journalistic organisations are Platform Partners. They contribute verified reports about attacks against media freedom and journalists’ safety to the online Platform to urge remedial actions and necessary reforms to laws and practices in member

states, in accordance with protections guaranteed under the European Convention on Human Rights and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights.

The Platform Partners' 2021 Annual Report, entitled *Wanted! Real action for media freedom in Europe*, was launched at a press conference and public event on 28 April. See the Partners' Annual Report website page for details: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/media-freedom/annual-report-2021>

The Secretary-General's Annual Report, English
version: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/secretary-general/report-2021#page-0>

SG's Annual Report, French
version: <https://www.coe.int/fr/web/secretary-general/report-2021#page-0>