

Russian objections overshadow upbeat results from meeting of European media ministers

By William Horsley
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Russia today disrupted a public show of unity by European governments in favour of tough actions to counter attacks against journalists and press freedom. At a major conference of European media ministers, Russia objected to a key Council of Europe mechanism for protecting media freedom, the ‘Platform for the protection of journalism and the safety of journalists’.

The digital platform was set up in 2015. It is managed in cooperation with 14 Partner organisations concerned with media freedom as an ‘early warning and rapid response’ system against growing threats to media freedom and journalists’ safety across Europe.

The conference has been hosted by the Council of Europe and the government of Cyprus. On the second and final day the Russian delegation accused the Platform of an ‘unbalanced and biased’ approach to issues of media freedom in Russia. It said Russia would maintain its lack of cooperation with the platform until what it called its ‘prejudice’ was corrected.

The Russian Federation declared its opposition to the Platform’s work in an ‘interpretive statement’ issued at the end of the conference. The statement also expressed Russia’s wider disagreement with significant parts of the Council of Europe’s strategy for reversing the decline in the safety of journalists. Russia objected to states being called on to protect “other media actors” – meaning bloggers and others who contribute to an informed public debate. It said the term was too vague and broad.

Russia also rejected the references in the conference texts to “gender” and “sexual orientation” with regard to protections for journalists. For these reasons, it said, Russia “disassociates itself from the content” of the conference Resolution on the Safety of Journalists and the Resolution on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on freedom of expression.

However, in an apparent contradiction, the Russian statement also said: “this delegation has decided to support the final documents of the conference, although it is not in a position to agree with some of their provisions.” The conference documents are seen as significant political commitments but are not legally binding.

Russia’s claim that the Platform has demonstrated anti-Russian bias and ignored violations against Russian journalists and media is not borne out by the statistics about alerts on the Platform website www.coe.int/fom . The site shows details of 109 current or “active” media freedom alerts related to threats to media freedom in Russia, and only two alerts that were satisfactorily “resolved”.

However, the Platform has registered more than ten cases in which Ukraine received media freedom alerts about its actions directed against Russian journalists such as entry bans, detentions or expulsions. Overall, Ukraine still faces 60 active alerts. But it has resolved 11 others, and has replied to nearly all, as requested. Several Platform alerts addressed to Ukraine relate to violations that were recorded in Russian-occupied Crimea and in parts of eastern Ukraine that are under the control of pro-Russian rebels.

At the 2-day ministerial conference many government delegates and speakers described the Platform as a ‘global model’ and an outstanding success. Speakers acknowledged that has increased pressure on governments to remedy media freedom violations, and raised awareness of the need for states to act decisively to reverse the “backsliding” in the safety of journalists.

Journalists’ organisations and concerned NGOs welcomed the Resolution on journalists’ safety and the Final Declaration. In the Resolution on the safety of journalists, European governments pledge to provide mechanisms to guard against attacks on journalists, and to give priority to making sure that those responsible for attacks and ill-treatment of journalists are brought to justice.

The Final Declaration calls on the Council of Europe’s top decision-making body, the Committee of Ministers, to implement comprehensive plans for preventing, investigating and sanctioning threats against journalists’ safety.

The AEJ is a co-founder and Partner of the Platform for the safety of journalists. The European Federation of Journalists and International Press Institute, as well as leading free expression NGOs, make up the 14 partner organisations of the Council of Europe for managing the Platform.