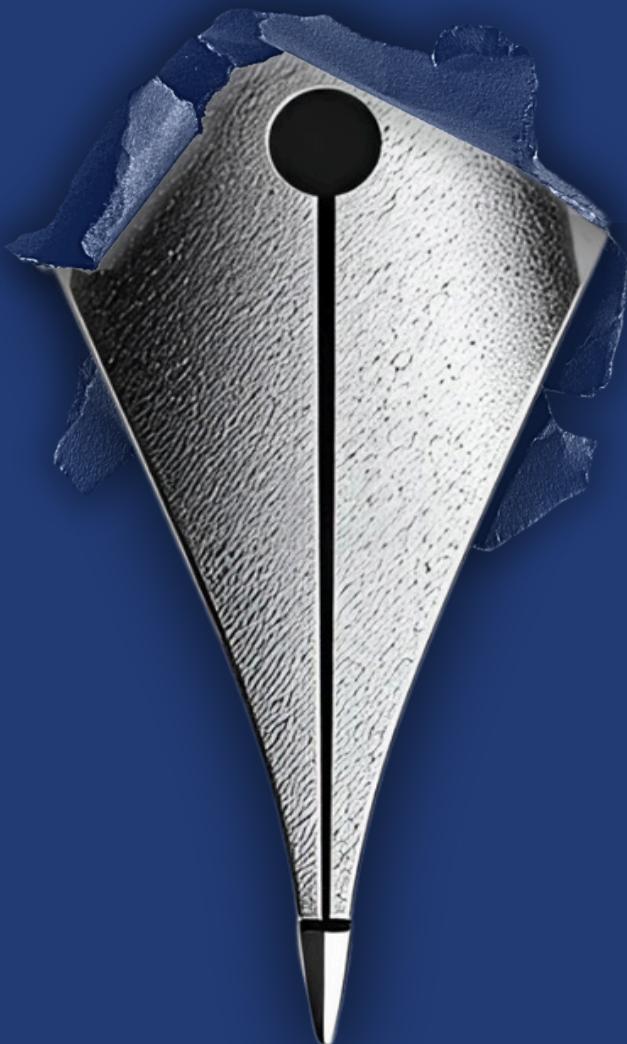


ENHANCING PROTECTION OF JOURNALISTS UNDER SEVERE POLITICAL PRESSURE

Outcome Report



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive summary	4
Introduction	6
Defining Journalists under Severe Political Pressure	8
Global Context	8
International Agreements Supporting the Safety of Journalists	8
Challenges Faced by JUSPP	11
Physical Safety and Transnational Repression	11
Legal and Bureaucratic Hurdles	12
Financial Constraints/Independence	14
Digital Security Risks and Lack of Platform Accountability	16
Isolation and Integration Challenges	19
Recommendations	20
Conclusion	23

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In an increasingly hostile global environment for independent journalism, journalists under severe political pressure (JUSPP) represent the most vulnerable segment of the media landscape in the OSCE region.

In the context of this report, JUSPP are defined as journalists and other media professionals who face systematic threats and persecution from state or non-state actors due to their reporting and dissemination of information. These threats often escalate to a point where their safety and liberty, as well as that of their family members, are severely compromised, often compelling them to seek refuge in other countries. The persecution can manifest in various forms, including but not limited to:

- Physical violence, including attacks, abductions, and even assassinations.
- Legal harassment through spurious charges, politically motivated trials, and imprisonment.
- Digital threats, such as surveillance, hacking, and online harassment.
- Economic pressure, including the freezing and seizure of assets and the administrative obstruction of their ability to work.
- Transnational repression, where the persecuting state extends its reach beyond its borders to target journalists in exile.

These journalists typically flee their home countries, often as a last resort, undertaken to ensure survival and the ability to continue journalistic work without the immediate threat of reprisal.

These individuals are not only silenced in their home countries through legal and extra-legal means but also face continued threats and obstacles in exile.

Having left their home countries under threat of harassment, imprisonment, or physical danger despite relocation, these journalists often continue to remain targets of transnational repression, facing digital attacks and being subject to digital surveillance, legal harassment, pressure on their family members, including those left behind in home countries, and experiencing barriers to adequate formal recognition in host countries. As such, the threats confronting journalists in exile are complex, cross-border, and increasing.

The modern media landscape in the OSCE region is increasingly characterized by suppression of independent voices through persistent intimidation, arbitrary detention, and forced exile. As such, JUSPP constitute a growing group that deserves targeted policy attention.

Taking into account that independent media play a crucial role in sustaining democratic values and public accountability, the OSCE participating States are recommended to respond to the cases of JUSPP with coordinated, sustained strategies that provide relevant legal assistance and support, funding opportunities, digital resilience, and robust diplomacy.

Their continued work is critical for ensuring the flow of pluralistic information within the OSCE region, an important part of organization's comprehensive approach to security. Their rigorous and independent reporting serves as a critical bulwark against the erosion of democratic norms, effectively exposing abuses of power, meticulously countering state-sponsored disinformation and propaganda, and ensuring that transnational publics remain informed and engaged, which is vital for accountability and stability across the OSCE region. The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM), who is tasked to continue advocacy and promotion of the safety of journalists as per Ministerial Council Decision No. 3/18¹, is uniquely positioned to spearhead coordinated responses to the needs of this group.

Recognizing the urgency of the issues of JUSPPs, the OSCE RFoM convened two expert roundtable meetings in March and April 2025 to examine the plight of JUSPP and identify pragmatic, rights-based strategies for their protection and empowerment. The roundtables particularly benefited from the insightful perspectives of experts from: Reporters Without Borders (RSF), European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), European Fund for Journalism in Exile (JX Fund), Network of Exiled Media Outlets (NEMO), Deutsche Welle Akademie, Redkollegia, International Cities of Refugee Network (ICORN), European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), Media and Law Studies Association (MLSA), Press Club Belarus, Thomson Reuters, Media Hub Riga, Foundation for Democracy and Liberal Values, Mass Media Defence Centre, and Belarusian Association of Journalists.

This outcome report integrates expert testimonies and recommendations, key findings from a comprehensive Baseline Study commissioned by the RFoM and prepared in 2024 by Prof. Andrei Richter of the Comenius University, Bratislava, as well as thematic insights from other intergovernmental mandates and civil society organizations.²

¹ OSCE Ministerial Council Decision on Media Freedom, Decision no.3: safety of journalists, <https://www.osce.org/chairpersonship/406538>.

² Journalists in Exile – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression (2024), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5653-journalists-exile-report-special-rapporteur-promotion-and>; Free Press Unlimited, "Exile Media: State of Play" (2022); UNESCO "Freedom of Expression and the Safety of Journalists" (2025), <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/freedom-expression-and-safety-journalists>; ProtectDefenders.eu position paper on EU visa mechanisms for human rights defenders, <https://srdefenders.org/resource/position-paper-concerning-eu-visas-as-a-protection-tool-for-human-rights-defenders/>; JX Fund, "Locking Down the Windows: A new phase in the fight for press freedom in Russia", Research Report, JX Fund, <https://jx-fund.org/newsroom/news/study-locking-down-the-windows/>; JX Fund, Study: Belarusian Media Since the Revolution of 2020, <https://jx-fund.org/newsroom/news/silenced-but-resilient-belarusian-media-since-the-revolution-of-2020-2/>.

INTRODUCTION

Freedom of expression, enshrined in international legal instruments and OSCE commitments, is a cornerstone of democratic societies. Yet across the OSCE region and beyond, independent journalists are increasingly becoming the targets of political repression, digital surveillance, and legal persecution. Many are forced to flee abroad, but exile does not necessarily equate to safety. When abroad, JUSPP often find themselves struggling to secure funds, obtain proper residence and work-related documentation, open bank accounts, and can find themselves exposed to transnational repression, to name just a handful of some of the key challenges highlighted in this report.

The OSCE, through the RFoM, plays a critical role in safeguarding media freedom across its 57 participating States. The expert roundtables convened by the RFoM in March and April 2025, along with the Baseline Study, have provided critical insights into the threats faced by JUSPP.

The Baseline Study offers a granular view of the risks and needs faced by JUSPP. It underscores that exile is typically a last resort, driven by imminent threats to life and liberty. The study finds that while exiled journalists contribute substantially to democratic media ecosystems, they operate under a dual burden: threats from their country of origin and insufficient protection in their country of refuge. These journalists face challenges ranging from limited or restricted funding sources to threats of extradition and deportation, technology related threats and others. The study also emphasizes the significance of the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) in providing a possible protective legal framework. However, implementation gaps remain, especially in terms of cross-border protections and data privacy.

The expert discussion also highlighted several positive examples and best practices in addressing the challenges faced by journalists in exile. The **EFJ** offers a robust network providing free membership, legal support, administrative assistance, and international press cards. This initiative significantly reduces isolation, making exiled journalists harder to target. **DW** has also demonstrated a best practice in providing sustained psychological support, recognizing the long-term nature of exile. Some states are also showing promising developments with regard to countering transnational repression. As noted by experts during the roundtable discussion, the **United Kingdom** government is considering public policy to counter transnational repression. **France** has demonstrated awareness, with a criminal court trial against a death squad targeting an Azerbaijani journalist.³ **Lithuania** has pursued a criminal complaint against the Belarussian President for hijacking of the plane with a journalist on board with terrorist intent. **Poland** stands out as a strong example, where collaborative efforts between NGOs and the government led

³ On 4 June 2025, a French court sentenced Khayyam Hagverdiyev, an Azerbaijani man, behind the attack on exiled blogger Mohammad Mirzali to ten years in prison. Hagverdiyev was arrested after stabbing Mirzali in 2021 multiple times. Mirzali survived the attack.

to the issuance of humanitarian passports for Belarusian exiles, alongside established communication channels between police/security services and the exiled community, and local NGO support for vetting and bank account setup.⁴ **Latvia** has fostered a police contact point with Latvia's Journalist Association and Journalist Union to facilitate effective response to threats against media workers. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the two journalist NGOs and the State Police in March 2020, providing a separate phone number for these organizations where they can reach out in a case of a threat. In the **Czech Republic**, a court ruling allowed for hiding certain registration information (names and addresses) for an exiled organization, enhancing privacy. On an organizational level, the **ECPMF** has secured substantial funding from the German government to support exiled journalists in Germany.⁵ **Sweden** offers a positive model with a two-year residency permit provided as a freelance visa. **Spain** demonstrated a proactive approach by offering citizenship to Nicaraguan citizens whose citizenship was revoked by their government.

This report builds upon these discussions and research to offer a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and to propose actionable recommendations for OSCE participating States.

The points highlighted in this report also include the findings by numerous international reports on the challenges faced by exiled media, which call for durable support ecosystems including rights and protection pathways among other things.

Baseline Study key takeaways:

- The report focuses on the challenges faced by journalists under severe political pressure (JUSPP) in the OSCE region, who are often forced to flee their home countries due to safety concerns.
- These journalists face threats such as physical, technological, and legal harassment, often from their home states, even in exile.
- Despite these challenges, exiled media play a crucial role in providing independent information, often filling information gaps left by restrictive environments in their home countries.
- The report highlights the need for a coordinated international approach to support these journalists, ensuring their safety and ability to continue their work.
- The OSCE RFoM has a key role to play in addressing these issues, through its mandate to promote free, independent and pluralistic media.

⁴ When will Belarusians start receiving humanitarian residence permits in Poland? Results of a new meeting of the working group under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/ru/news/fc3907fc966741a.html>; Central Bank of Belarus: Belarusians in Poland can present a travel document instead of a passport at banks, government agencies and when applying for a residence permit, <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/56228.html>; Polish travel document for citizens of Belarus, <https://www.migrant.info.pl/ru/aktualnosci-969/pol-skij-proezdnij-dokument-dla-grazdan-belorussii>.

⁵ Foreign Minister Baerbock and Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media Roth are launching the Hannah Arendt Initiative, a programme supporting journalists at risk, press release, Federal Foreign Office of Germany, 14 October 2022, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/hannah-arendt-initiative-2558726>.

DEFINING JOURNALISTS UNDER SEVERE POLITICAL PRESSURE

The term JUSPP refers to media professionals who typically flee their home countries to avoid persecution based on their journalistic work. They are often subjected to arbitrary legal charges, violence, or restrictions on freedom of movement and expression. The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression notes that exile is increasingly a result of political repression, rather than conflict alone.⁶ These journalists are not merely displaced persons; they are *de facto* human rights defenders, often continuing their work from abroad under immense pressure and at personal risk.

The Berlin-based JX Fund and the UN Special Rapporteur further categorize these individuals under "exiled independent media (EXIM)," which includes freelancers, bloggers, and digital journalists who operate independently from their host countries. These groups maintain editorial independence and serve the public interest despite external constraints.

GLOBAL CONTEXT

International Agreements Supporting the Safety of Journalists

The OSCE participating States have, through various international agreements and meetings, declared their support for the safety of journalists within their respective states and beyond:

- **1975 Helsinki Final Act:** Participating States affirmed the fundamental importance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, which inherently include freedom of expression and the press.⁷
- **1991 OSCE Moscow Document:** This document established the principle that human rights commitments are a matter of legitimate concern for all participating States, thereby providing a framework for addressing violations of media freedom across the OSCE region.⁸
- **2010 Astana Commemorative Declaration:** Participating States reaffirmed the principles of the Moscow Meeting, reiterating the collective responsibility for upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms.⁹
- **2018 OSCE Ministerial Council Decision on Safety of Journalists N 3/18:** This dedicated decision specifically addressed the growing threats to journalists and

⁶ *Journalists in exile: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression*, Irene Khan. 26 April 2024, A/HRC/56/53, UN Human Rights Council, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/56/53>.

⁷ *Helsinki Final Act*, <https://www.osce.org/helsinki-final-act>.

⁸ *Document of the Moscow meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the OSCE*, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/14310>.

⁹ *Astana Commemorative Declaration Towards a Security Community*, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/6/74985.pdf>.

committed participating States to taking concrete steps to ensure their safety.¹⁰

- **1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR):** Article 19 of the ICCPR, which has been ratified by many OSCE participating States, guarantees the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers.¹¹

On 8 August 2025, the European Media Freedom Act¹² adopted by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union enters into force. But whether the document and its provisions will uphold media freedom in a context of growing authoritarian tendencies in parts of Europe remains to be seen.¹³ Since 2022 international human rights organizations have been ringing alarm bells on the rise of authoritarian regimes globally – “a product of sixteen consecutive years of decline in global freedom,” as noted in an editorial letter penned by Freedom House (USA) the same year as the launch of the annual Freedom in the World report series.¹⁴ Since then, there has been little to no improvement. As per the most recent report, “[g]lobal freedom declined for the 19th consecutive year in 2024.”¹⁵

The rise of authoritarian governance and the erosion of democratic norms has dangerous consequences for independent media.¹⁶ This is best seen in the most recent Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index, according to which, “For the first time in the history of the Index, the conditions for practising journalism are “difficult” or “very serious” in over half of the world’s countries and satisfactory in fewer than one in four.”¹⁷ Of 57 OSCE participating States, 11 were ranked below 100 among the 180 countries ranked by the Index. Among them are Turkmenistan (174), the Russian Federation (171), Azerbaijan (167), Belarus (166), Turkey (159), Tajikistan (153), Kyrgyzstan (144), Georgia (144), Kazakhstan (141), and Mongolia (102).

Numerous RFoM interventions on safety of journalists and the 2018 OSCE Ministerial Council Decision on Safety of Journalists N 3/18,¹⁸ among others, indicate how media professionals in participating States face a multitude of threats including arbitrary detention, violence, and censorship. In many of these countries, regimes in power have

¹⁰ Decision No.3, Safety of Journalists, <https://www.osce.org/chairpersonship/406538>.

¹¹ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>.

¹² Regulation (EU) 2024/1083 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 establishing a common framework for media services in the internal market and amending Directive 2010/13/EU (European Media Freedom Act), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32024R1083>; European Media Freedom Act, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/protecting-democracy/european-media-freedom-act_en.

¹³ The European Media Freedom Act: the Solution to Capture or Just Fine Art, IPI, 27 March 2025, <https://ipi.media/the-european-media-freedom-act-the-solution-to-capture-or-just-fine-art/>.

¹⁴ The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule, Freedom House 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule>.

¹⁵ The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights, Freedom House 2025, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2025/uphill-battle-to-safeguard-rights>.

¹⁶ Rise of authoritarianism puts press freedom under increasing pressure, Free Press Unlimited, 3 May 2024, <https://www.freepressunlimited.org/en/current/rise-authoritarianism-puts-press-freedom-under-increasing-pressure>.

¹⁷ Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index, 2025, https://rsf.org/en/rsf-world-press-freedom-index-2025-economic-fragility-leading-threat-press-freedom?year=2025&data_type=general.

¹⁸ Journalists under attack, a threat to media freedom, <https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/415115>; Ministerial Council Decision on Media Freedom, Decision no.3: safety of journalists, <https://www.osce.org/chairpersonship/406538>.

long been targeting independent journalists, leaving them no choice but to relocate to third countries, often to neighbouring countries or European and North American cities, seeking safety and refuge from persecution.

But even relocation to neighbouring countries where often there is no visa requirement is becoming no longer an option due to new risks. Countries like Georgia used to be a safe refuge for journalists from Azerbaijan, Russia and Belarus; however, this is no longer the case due to the swift decline in Georgia's democratic norms and freedoms. As noted in the most recent RSF Index, in Georgia, the political environment "remains hostile for independent and opposition media, with a growing number of verbal and physical attacks against journalists. The adoption of laws on 'foreign influence' and 'family values' marginalises journalists, exposes them to censorship and reduces space for free speech."¹⁹ As was noted by one of the experts working on Belarus, the adoption of the foreign agent law made it virtually impossible for Belarusian journalists working from Georgia to continue their work, leaving them no choice but to leave the country altogether.²⁰ Overall journalists reportedly prefer not to stay in non-EU member states over fear of extradition and deportation, as was noted at the expert roundtables.

Elsewhere, journalists in exile who have fled their countries of origin due to physical or legal threats, and violence and other forms of persecution and prosecution, face renewed risks. As highlighted at the expert roundtables, as well as in the Internews report "Flight and Fight" (2024) and Free Press Unlimited's "Mapping the challenges faced by independent media in exile" (2022), the systemic barriers faced by exiled journalists, including difficulty in securing legal residency, access to work permits, and sustainable funding,²¹ are some of the structural gaps faced by exiled journalists, which are compounded by digital threats and social isolation. These gaps add to overall sense of fear among exiled journalists, as was noted during the expert roundtable by the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom. Without financial and visa support, fear becomes an existential issue. European states are becoming stricter on asylum policies, and there is no mechanism to expedite the application process. Delays in processing visas and legal status are common, and immigration officers are often unaware of political situations in journalists' home countries. The EU's Dublin Regulation,²² which establishes the criteria and mechanisms for determining the state responsible for examining an asylum application, creates constant fear of deportation while transnational repression is often not considered in asylum decisions.

19 Reporters Without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index*, 2025, <https://rsf.org/en/index>.

20 Follow up with the Legal Center for Belarusian Association for Journalists, May 2025; Belarusian independent media sector: analysis of key achievements, current landscape and support needs, Press Club Belarus, 2024.

21 *Flight and Fight*, Internews, May 2024, <https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Flight-and-Fight-Report-Internews-Final.pdf>; *Exile Media: Mapping the challenges faced by independent media in exile*, Free Press Unlimited, April 2022, https://kq.freepressunlimited.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/FPU_Exile-Media.pdf.

22 *The Dublin Regulation*, <https://www.unhcr.org/media/dublin-regulation>.

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) underscores that human rights defenders, including journalists, should receive specialized support and visibility.²³ The OSCE participating States have pledged to protect freedom of expression under frameworks such as the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, the 1991 Moscow Meeting, and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

The 2010 Astana Commemorative Declaration and the 2018 OSCE Ministerial Council Decision on the Safety of Journalists reaffirm that threats to journalists are threats to democratic security. These agreements provide a platform for dialogue, progress monitoring, and follow-up mechanisms to ensure the safety and viability of journalists under threat, including those in exile.

CHALLENGES FACED BY JUSPP

Physical Safety and Transnational Repression

A defining characteristic of the threats faced by JUSPP is the persistence of repression across borders. Even in exile, journalists are subjected to transnational repression through legal, physical, and digital means.

According to Freedom House, Transnational Repression²⁴ (TR) is:

“Governments reaching across borders to silence dissent among diasporas and exiles, including through assassinations, illegal deportations, abductions, digital threats, Interpol abuse, and family intimidation.

It is a daily assault on civilians everywhere — including in democracies like the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, Australia, and South Africa.”

Due to the important nature of their work, some governments continue to target exiled journalists beyond their borders using surveillance, extradition requests, family intimidation, and even abduction. Tools like International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) Red Notices are exploited to issue politically motivated alerts, while spyware (e.g., Pegasus) is used to monitor communications remotely.

In extreme cases, such as the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018 and the alleged poisoning attempts on Russian journalists and dissidents in Europe in recent years, physical attacks have been carried out on

²³ Protecting human rights defenders at risk: EU entry, stay and support, FRA, 11 July 2023, <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2023/human-rights-defenders>; FRA's Fundamental Rights Reports 2023 (<https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2023/fundamental-rights-report-2023>), 2024 (<https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/fundamental-rights-report-2024>), 2025 (<https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2025/fundamental-rights-report-2025>).

²⁴ Transnational Repression, Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression>.

foreign soil. One notorious example of state overreach includes the forced landing of a commercial aircraft by Belarusian authorities to arrest journalist Raman Protasevich in 2021.

In the case of Russia, the authorities actively pressure journalists and critics even beyond its borders. In recent years hundreds of Russian journalists fled abroad, only to face transnational legal persecution and harassment of relatives back home.²⁵ For example, CPJ notes that exiles continue to confront “international arrest warrants” and surveillance. Journalist Inna Denisova, exiled in France since 2022, said, “We’re systematically targeted by international arrest warrants... my articles have been passed on to the FSB.”²⁶ These measures show how Russian authorities use cross-border intimidation to silence independent media abroad.

In Azerbaijan the authorities likewise reach beyond the country’s borders to punish critical journalists. Global Voices reports that exiled Azerbaijani reporters “persist in their mission despite facing surveillance, digital attacks, and threats to their families back home.”²⁷ A stark case is journalist Afgan Mukhtarli: after fleeing to Georgia, he was abducted in Tbilisi in 2017 and forcibly returned to Azerbaijan for trial. Such cross-border kidnappings and legal retaliation exemplify Azerbaijan’s transnational repression of exiled media.

The concept of “transnational repression,” was also highlighted in recent UN reports, concluding that this form of repression encompasses the systematic targeting of journalists abroad, using both legal instruments and physical threats.²⁸ This undermines the ability of journalists to live safely and work freely even after leaving their countries of origin.

As expressed by experts during the meetings in March and April 2025 and documented in international reports, threats do not end after relocation. In many cases, journalists are retraumatized by repeated surveillance or threats against their loved ones.

Legal and Bureaucratic Hurdles

Journalists in exile frequently face significant legal and bureaucratic hurdles in their host countries. These include difficulties in securing long-term visas, obtaining legal residency or work permits, and accessing financial services such as bank accounts due to absence of legal documentation of their status. Many are unable to gain professional accreditation due to a lack of legal recognition of their status as journalists. Moreover, being labelled as

²⁵ Russia’s repression record, CPJ, 11 February 2025, <https://cpj.org/?p=452159>; Exiled Russian journalists face growing threats in Europe, The Dispatch, <https://thedispatch.com/article/russian-journalists-exile-usaid-funding-cuts/>.

²⁶ Exiled Russian journalists face growing threats in Europe, The Dispatch, <https://thedispatch.com/article/russian-journalists-exile-usaid-funding-cuts/>.

²⁷ Arzu Geybullayeva, Reporting from exile: Azerbaijani journalists confront new realities and old fears, Global Voices, 30 April 2025, <https://globalvoices.org/2025/04/30/reporting-from-exile-azerbaijani-journalists-confront-new-realities-and-old-fears/>.

²⁸ Transnational repression of journalists threatens democracy: Special Rapporteur, press release, 26 June 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/06/transnational-repression-journalists-threatens-democracy-special-rapporteur>.

“terrorists”, “extremists” or “foreign agents” by their home states can lead to punitive measures abroad, such as restrictions on movement and frozen financial assets. Legal aid, where available, is often limited by geography, jurisdiction, and available country specific resources.

In Russia, for example, the authorities systematically use “foreign agent” and “undesirable organizations” laws to silence independent journalism and control the narrative, particularly since the start of full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The impact of these laws on Russian journalists who flee is still significant. The constant threat of being declared a “foreign agent” or having their former media outlets designated “undesirable” means that exiled journalists remain targets. This not only creates personal insecurity but also makes it difficult for them to maintain connections with sources and audiences inside Russia, as any interaction could put those individuals at risk.²⁹

The ProtectDefenders.eu position paper³⁰ calls for tailored EU visa pathways for human rights defenders – including journalists – as a crucial form of protection. Delays in legal processing, uncertainty in asylum status, and inconsistencies across national systems exacerbate insecurity.

The lack of recognition of journalism as a protected profession compounds these issues. According to Free Press Unlimited, host governments often lack protocols for integrating exiled media professionals into national journalism networks or granting them professional accreditation.

As was noted by ECPMF during the expert roundtables, European states are becoming stricter on asylum policies, and there is no emergency visa mechanism. Delays in processing are common. Although various visa options exist (freelance, employment, humanitarian, fellowship), all have significant gaps. In the case of humanitarian visas, these are often granted only with political connections and are not accessible to everyone, while fellowship visas are short-term and do not come with work permits. Schengen visas in general have become much harder to obtain due to a perception among EU member states that applicants would seek asylum. Asylum applications pose a whole other set of challenges – the time it takes to obtain a decision, as well as restrictions placed on the applicant – such as no work permits and restrictions on mobility. Finally, as noted by ECPMF, there are no equal protection mechanisms for journalists facing similar risks across different countries.

Several experts also mentioned the difficulty in obtaining employment letters when applying for visas.

29 Q & A with Roman Anin on Holding Putin to Account, Even in Exile, Global Investigative Journalism Network, Global Investigative Journalism Network, 21 October 2024, <https://gijn.org/stories/interview-roman-anin-holding-putin-accountable/>.

30 Enhancing visa procession for human rights defenders: key updates to the EU visa code handbook, Protectdefenders.eu, 2024, <https://protectdefenders.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/EU-MEMBER-STATES-CONSULAR-AUTHORITIES-AND-BORDER-OFFICIALS-PROTECTDEFENDERS.EU-GUIDANCE-NOTE-EU-VISA-HANDBOOK-2024.pdf>.

Access to adequate legal aid and contextual understanding is another major challenge. As was noted during the expert roundtables by an expert from the Mass Media Defense Center, it is difficult to find lawyers who not only understand the specific context of exiled media but also have jurisdiction where needed, and pro bono legal support for dealing with issues like spyware is scarce. The expert also detailed how pro bono services are often slow and limited in scope. Furthermore, there is the growing risk of extradition and deportation due to home countries prosecuting journalists in absentia, a development that demands urgent attention from host governments. Specifically, the expert mentioned the use of broadly defined “foreign agent” and “anti-extremism” laws, the use of spyware such as Pegasus (even by some EU states),³¹ and the vulnerability of exiled media’s registration information in public domains, which some governments can exploit to harm journalists.

Financial Constraints/Independence

Exiled media outlets are heavily reliant on external funding, primarily from international donors. However, recent suspensions of US aid have revealed the fragility of these support mechanisms. Journalists face difficulties maintaining operations, paying salaries, and investing in digital security. While some media organizations experiment with alternative models (e.g., VPN sales or publishing houses), they represent only a small part of supplementary funding and remain the exception rather than the norm. As such, there is an urgent need for continued donor support and sustainable funding models that include private-public partnerships and entrepreneurial strategies.

Free Press Unlimited’s research shows that media in exile struggle to maintain continuity and independence under these constraints. Internews adds that many outlets are forced into dependency on donors for survival, limiting their ability to innovate or grow. These challenges were also highlighted during the RFoM-organized expert meetings in Vienna. The representative from JX Fund highlighted that surveys among Russian and Belarusian media revealed a significant impact from foreign funding cuts, though the exact gap remains unknown. And although this dependence might not be as high as in other regions, it still critically affects salaries and editorial operations, with too much funding often going to salaries and less to core funding. The latter prevents the teams from having an in-house digital security expert, limits travel funds, and leaves fewer opportunities for freelancers. An expert representing the Foundation for Democracy and Liberal Values noted how restricted grants remained the only viable funding mechanism for independent exiled newsrooms as alternative business models (like selling VPNs or owning a publishing houses) were insufficient to cover operational expenses.

³¹ Pegasus project, *Forbidden Stories*, https://forbiddenstories.org/projects_posts/pegasus-project/.

On that note, most experts agreed that the US funding freeze shrank the pool of available funds but was not the only factor. It was noted that available funding was also decreasing due to the EU diverting funding into security and defence from the development sector. This shift is problematic because, as one expert argued, media should be seen as part of a critical infrastructure and pillar of democratic processes, not merely a development sector issue. The consequence of less money in the ecosystem is fewer employed journalists, fewer stories, less content, and ultimately, reduced public resilience against propaganda and misinformation.

Experts also discussed the challenges of alternative funding mechanisms and donor expectations. The expert from Redkollegia pointed out that Russian audiences, while willing to support exiled media, often cannot do so due to blocked bank accounts or the criminalization of supporting media declared as a “foreign agent”. While the representative from the Foundation for Democracy and Liberal Values mentioned the potential of working with private capital and private individuals who support independent media, they were, however, cautious that in the case of the latter, there were challenges in vetting funders and ensuring transparency. Another expert from Media Hub Riga suggested in-kind support or operating charity shops, while acknowledging that not every exiled media outlet will have a viable business model.

As such, several experts called for changes in how funding is allocated and perceived. The consensus was that public interest media in exile can no longer rely on business streams of funding (like advertising). There is a need for funds to be steady, long-term and flexible, and traditional forms of impact measurement used by donors must change, moving beyond simple metrics like follower counts.

One of the country case examples mentioned by the experts during the discussions was the financial survival of Belarusian journalists, which remains a major challenge. Since the 2020 electoral crackdown, nearly all independent outlets inside Belarus have been banned or labelled “extremist,” cutting off their normal revenue sources. Exiled Belarusian newsrooms report they “can’t work as media, as a business” once stripped of advertising.³² CPJ and RFE/Current Time detail that journalists abroad are “struggling to survive financially”, facing intensified competition for grants and donor confusion with Russian outlets.³³ In short, Belarusian authorities have declared many Belarusian outlets extremist, so advertisers and local funders flee; as one editor notes, “not a single [Belarusian] advertiser will risk his business...for the sake of advertising with us.”³⁴ These funding pressures force exiles to reduce operations or abandon journalism entirely.

Finally, the financial implications of legal and bureaucratic hurdles were also touched upon. The expert from ECPMF noted that without financial support, the fear faced by

³² Raman Vasyukovich, *Hard Times: Belarusian Media Abroad Say They Lack Money For Their 'Mission'*, RFE/RL, 13 February 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-exile-media-struggling-money/32817978.html>.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

journalists becomes an existential matter. The expert from Mass Media Defense Center pointed out that litigation in EU and US courts is costly and complicated to organize, and there is a lack of media lawyers willing to take on such cases pro bono, or organizations committed to following through. This often leaves journalists with no choice but to take on non-journalistic jobs.

In short, based on experts' input, there is a notable absence of core or operational support, which is necessary for long-term sustainability. This economic fragility threatens the existence of independent media outlets and increases the risk of burnout and attrition among journalists.

The 2025 GFMD and OECD data further quantify this crisis. Between 2020 and 2024, global official development assistance (ODA) for media development reached \$3.1 billion – an average of \$620 million annually. The United States contributed \$130 million per year, accounting for more than 20% of global ODA to media. The abrupt suspension of US media assistance in 2025 significantly impacted key regions:

These figures illustrate how deeply US foreign assistance has shaped global media ecosystems. The sudden funding gap has disrupted ongoing projects, created uncertainty for hundreds of journalists in exile, and jeopardized entire outlets reliant on such support.³⁵ The situation calls for an increase of funds provided by the European governments, development agencies, funds, and civil society organizations.

Digital Security Risks and Lack of Platform Accountability

Digital repression includes account hacking, takedown requests, and mass reporting to deplatform content. It is also part of what has been defined as digital transnational repression.

Numerous international organizations and experts have published reports on digital transnational repression. In 2022, Citizen Lab in its report, Psychological and Emotional War: Digital Transnational Repression in Canada looked at how authoritarian states employ digital tools to surveil, harass, and intimidate diaspora communities in the context of Canada.

Among the report's key findings were the following:

- **Digital Transnational Repression (DTR):** Authoritarian regimes use digital means – such as spyware, phishing attacks, and online harassment – to monitor and suppress dissent among diaspora communities abroad.

³⁵ Full data and analysis are available in the February 2025 briefing, "U.S. funding suspension - Mapping of the extent of crisis by region," published by GFMD.

- **Psychological Impact:** Victims of DTR experience significant psychological stress, leading to self-censorship and a reluctance to engage in activism or express dissenting views.
- **Community Erosion:** DTR not only affects individuals but also undermines trust within diaspora communities, weakening collective action and support networks.
- **Limited Support:** Canadian law enforcement and intelligence agencies often lack the resources or frameworks to effectively address DTR, leaving victims without adequate protection or recourse.

During the roundtables discussions experts also raised online harassment. Noting examples such as that of Irina Dolenina³⁶ being under surveillance and Galina Timchenko's phone³⁷ being infected with Pegasus spyware, the expert from the Committee to Protect Journalists emphasized that physical risks must be considered alongside online harassment and surveillance especially as such incidents create immense uncertainty and pressure on journalists' sense of security. Others shared examples website and IP blocking, immediate blocking of mirror websites, restrictive laws that deter audience access, DDoS attacks, and phishing attacks. An expert from Media Hub Riga pointed to the EU data protection laws, which are misused as part of transnational repression. Specifically, the expert noted that the transparency inherent in the EU's data access frameworks is being exploited as a tool for transnational repression, making it simple to obtain information on exiled organizations, platforms, and individuals. To counter this, the Media Policy Department in the Ministry of Culture of Latvia and Media Hub Riga is engaging with the Ministry of Finance to develop a protective mechanism. This mechanism would aim to implement an 'additional layer of privacy' during the registration process for these entities, possibly by requiring judicial oversight for data access requests pertaining to exiled media or non-governmental organizations.

The role tech companies and platforms play as an extension of censorship was also mentioned at the expert roundtables. Numerous examples suggest how companies' lack of understanding of political contexts, deployment of automated response bots, and unwillingness or lack of interest in addressing threats faced by smaller, less-known media players breeds more ground for targeted harassment. All too often, such tools are also not gender-responsive. In the case of the latter, when it concerns safety of women journalists online specifically, or overall understanding of the use of platforms by journalists in countries where media censorship is rampant, social media platforms have

³⁶ Irina Dolinina, a journalist with the investigative outlet Important Stories (Istories), has been under various forms of surveillance and pressure, even after fleeing Russia to Prague. She was designated as a "foreign agent" by the Russian Justice Ministry. Dolinina also received direct threats to her life, delivered via email and social media. These threats included details that suggested the perpetrators had knowledge of her physical whereabouts in Czech Republic. <https://reports.ovd.info/en/transnational-repression-russian-federation-threats-tendencies-solutions>; <https://www.rferl.org/a/cpj-russian-journalists-czech-republic-threats/32604303.html>.

³⁷ In September 2023, an investigation by Access Now and the Citizen Lab found that Galina Timchenko's iPhone was infected with Pegasus spyware in February 2023. This "zero-click" spyware, produced by the Israeli company NSO Group, can take full control of a phone without the user's knowledge or interaction, accessing messages, photos, contacts, and even activating the microphone and camera. The Pegasus infection occurred around 10 February 2023, while she was in Berlin, shortly after Meduza was designated an "undesirable" organization. Apple had warned Timchenko and "other targets" in June 2023 that their devices might have been targeted by state-sponsored spyware. <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/exiled-russian-media-pegsus/>; <https://citizenlab.ca/2023/09/pegasus-infection-of-galina-timchenko-exiled-russian-journalist-and-publisher/>.

thus far failed to invest in (human) resources to effectively tackle harassment on their platforms, especially from a gender perspective. The overreliance of platforms on machine-learning algorithms poses several human rights concerns, in particular as these algorithms are shielded from any external review, negating the principles of transparency and accountability.³⁸ As a report by the Electronic Frontier Foundation puts it: "Civil Society, and governments have been denied access to the training data or basic assumptions driving the algorithms, and there has never been any sort of third-party audit of such technology".³⁹

It is crucial that platforms engage with individuals with contextual knowledge and an understanding of political and social contexts as well as local languages, and keep humans in the loop. Otherwise, news reporting will continue to be taken down from social media platforms, for example based on takedown requests by state actors for alleged problematic or pornographic content, and states' silencing efforts, particularly of media actors in exile, will continue to succeed. This is especially the case when appeals to the platforms only receive automated responses.

In some contexts, platforms like Meta's Facebook rely on lists of allegedly dangerous individuals and organizations in their content moderation practices. This results in news reports that mention names on the list being flagged and potentially blocked from social media platforms because of their reporting on organizations designated as terrorists.⁴⁰ This approach to content moderation fails to distinguish between objective reporting and actual propaganda. There are currently no safeguarding mechanisms to prevent undue account suspension. Moreover, journalists who are independent or who do not work for bigger, well-known media organizations often do not receive responses from platforms and are not given the same attention in terms of user safety.

Another problem is that it is virtually impossible to reach and communicate with real individuals at these platforms. All too often, it takes an intervention by a third party that has direct contacts at these companies to address an issue at stake and resolve a specific problem.

In some countries, authoritarian-leaning governments restrict online content by sending government requests to platforms to remove content or turn over information about users.⁴¹ In addition to other methods of persecution and prosecution, these governments also deploy a range of online tools, including the use of troll armies, account compromise,

³⁸ OSCE RFoM, "Spotlight on Artificial Intelligence and Freedom of Expression: A Policy Manual", 2021, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/f/510332_0.pdf.

³⁹ Jillian C. York, "Caught in the Net: The Impact of "Extremist" Speech Regulations on Human Rights Content the Net", EFF, 30 May 2019, <https://www.eff.org/wp/caught-net-impact-extremist-speech-regulations-human-rights-content>.

⁴⁰ For the Facebook list of Dangerous Individuals and Organizations, see <https://theintercept.com/document/2021/10/12/facebook-dangerous-individuals-and-organizations-list-reproduced-snapshot>

⁴¹ Excerpt from Chapter 17, "Digital threats against journalists", Emily Bell and Taylor Owen (eds.), *Journalism After Snowden*, GIJN, 2017, <https://gijn.org/2017/06/13/journalism-after-snowden-the-growing-digital-threat-to-the-press>.

DDoS attacks, and the man-in-the-middle attacks⁴² against news websites, spear-phishing⁴³, or excessive content removal requests.

Internews documents that many platforms have failed to uphold their responsibilities to protect journalists from these abuses, despite obligations under European law (e.g., the Digital Services Act and the European Media Freedom Act).

Free Press Unlimited emphasizes that exiled media often lack the technical resources to secure their platforms or respond to digital attacks. There is a growing need for secure communications, cyber hygiene training, and platform accountability.

Isolation and Integration Challenges

Beyond technical and legal obstacles, social and professional isolation further undermines the ability of exiled journalists to thrive. Disconnection from local journalist associations, limited access to legal and administrative guidance, and cultural or linguistic barriers inhibit effective integration. Female journalists are particularly vulnerable, facing both professional marginalization and heightened risks of gender-based violence in relation to their work. Psychological stress, displacement trauma, and fear of retaliation against family members also contribute to burnout and cause many to leave journalism altogether.

Internews categorizes these challenges in three phases: dislocation, fragmentation, and reconstruction. Without systemic support, journalists face long-term professional marginalization.

FRA's guidance on protecting human rights defenders underscores the need for targeted, inclusive programming.

At the EFJ level, its network of members offers free membership to exiled journalists, granting them access to legal support, administrative assistance, and other forms of aid. This membership aims to make exiled journalists less vulnerable by integrating them into a collective. The network also assists in obtaining international press cards. Furthermore, the EFJ has support programmes for journalists, including temporary relocation and shelter for those under threat.

Despite adversity, exiled journalists strive to uphold professional standards and provide reliable information. The European Media Freedom Act (2024) offers a foundation for recognizing and supporting “quality media service providers” who maintain editorial independence and adhere to journalistic ethics. However, many exiled journalists lack access to the resources and networks needed to meet these standards consistently.

⁴² This refers to a cyberattack where communication between two parties is altered or manufactured while the parties believe they have private and direct connection.

⁴³ This refers to an electronic communication scam with the intention to gain access to an individual's account or impersonate a specific individual.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Enhance legal, political and social protections

OSCE participating States are highly encouraged to:

- Ensure coordinated and reinforced implementation of the relevant OSCE commitments as outlined in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, 1991 Moscow Meeting, 2010 Astana Declaration, and 2018 OSCE Ministerial Decision on Safety of Journalists;
- Develop and implement comprehensive visa and residency programs for journalists in exile (JUSPP) that ensure long-term security. These programmes should align with and leverage the best practices found in existing protections for human rights defenders, explicitly providing for family reunification and facilitating professional mobility, consistent with OSCE commitments on media freedom and human rights;
- Establish emergency visa regimes, drawing directly from the successful ProtectDefenders.eu framework, to provide immediate and renewable protection for journalists at imminent risk to their safety;
- Regularly raise awareness of immigration officers and relevant agencies involved in processing applications for visa, employment and entry on the scale of transnational repression, and enhance their knowledge to offer better and faster support to JUSPP facing this form of threats;
- Address the alarming trend of authoritarian governments exploiting international legal frameworks, such as international extradition procedures and anti-extremism statutes, to persecute journalists in exile;
- Institute concrete measures to protect journalists in exile from transnational repression, including the implementation of pre-emptive and remedial safeguards concerning INTERPOL notices and the establishment of robust, accessible safe refuge channels;
- Establish comprehensive legal aid programmes to defend JUSPP from politically motivated charges and persecution, such as legal aid centres specializing in defending JUSPP from transnational repression;
- Support and respect editorial independence of media outlets in exile to protect journalists from internal and external pressures that may compromise their journalistic integrity.

2. Enhance legal, political and social protections

OSCE participating States are highly encouraged to:

- Shift from the short-time project-based funding and explore opportunities for providing long-term core operational funding that supports innovation, entrepreneurship, and viability in order to reduce dependency of journalists at risk on temporary grants of donors and governments;

- Promote donor flexibility to cover infrastructure and legal costs, and staff well-being;
- Support exiled media in building sustainable business models (e.g., advertising networks, content syndication), including by encouraging public-private partnerships and crowdfunding and reader subscriptions to paid partnerships;
- Consider tax exemptions and subsidies for bona fide exiled media, and support and promote media hubs offering them co-working spaces, production tools, and mentorship programmes;
- Provide funding support to existing organizational initiatives that aim at offering independent journalists in exile the means to restart their journalistic activity.

3. Strengthen diplomatic and institutional advocacy

Beyond technical solutions, political will in supporting JUSPP is essential. In this regard, OSCE participating States are highly encouraged to:

- Engage further in both quiet diplomacy and public advocacy to elevate the plight of JUSPP, as well as to pursue closer interstate cooperation and information-sharing on the spectrum of challenges faced by such journalists;
- Apply diplomatic pressure to states that persecute journalists beyond their borders;
- Support and sponsor awareness campaigns and training initiatives for national consular services, law enforcement, judicial bodies, national security and defence institutions, border control, immigration services and civil society actors to improve institutional awareness and responses to JUSPP protection;
- Employ international legal mechanisms to challenge unlawful detentions and cross-border extraditions;
- Use international fora to highlight cases of transnational repression of JUSPP and advocate for their diplomatic protections;
- Establish rapid response teams on national levels with legal, digital, and relocation capacity;
- Support systematic, reliable data-gathering and research to better understand the issues of JUSPP, and advocate for effective responses, best practices, and support mechanisms.

4. Strengthen Digital Security and Safety

OSCE participating States are highly encouraged to:

- Mandate platform responsiveness to journalist-targeted harassment, and require transparency in content takedown;
- Support and fund secure hosting, mirror sites, and encrypted platforms for at-risk newsrooms;
- Prohibit the use and export of spyware technologies to authoritarian governments;

The European Parliament has put forth several policy recommendations⁴⁴ regarding the use of spyware technology, which can serve as important guidance for OSCE participating States. These recommendations emphasize stringent oversight, accountability, and protection against misuse:

- **Judicial Authorization and Oversight:** Spyware surveillance should be an exception, requiring effective, binding, and meaningful prior judicial authorization from an impartial and independent judicial authority. Additionally, any spyware surveillance must undergo scrutiny by an independent ex post oversight authority.
- **Market Regulation for Spyware:**
 - Only interception and extraction technology, not 'hacking as a service,' should be permissible for sale by companies within the OSCE participating States and for acquisition by participating States.
 - Spyware should only be placed on the market for sale to and use by public authorities, based on a closed and regulated list.
 - When a participating State acquires spyware, the acquisition process must be auditable by an independent and impartial audit body with appropriate clearance.
- **Transparency and Accountability for Companies:** Companies offering surveillance technologies or services to state actors should disclose the nature of their export licences to the competent national supervisory authorities.

Similarly, the European Media Freedom Act,⁴⁵ which applies to EU Member States and can also provide useful guidance for other OSCE participating States, emphasizes that Member States shall ensure that the surveillance measures and the deployment of intrusive surveillance software are regularly reviewed by a judicial authority or an independent and impartial decision-making authority in order to determine whether the conditions justifying their use continue to be fulfilled. It also underlines the importance of ensuring that media service providers, including journalists operating in the internal market for media services can rely on robust harmonized protection in relation to the deployment of intrusive surveillance software in the Union, including where Member State authorities resort to private parties to deploy it.

⁴⁴ Setting spyware standards after the Pegasus Scandal, European Parliament, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/766262/EPRI\(B2024\)766262_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/766262/EPRI(B2024)766262_EN.pdf); European Parliament decision of 10 March 2022 on setting up a committee of inquiry to investigate the use of the Pegasus and equivalent surveillance spyware, and defining the subject of the inquiry, as well as the responsibilities, numerical strength and term of office of the committee, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0071_EN.html; Report of the investigation of alleged contraventions and maladministration in the application of Union law in relation to the use of Pegasus and equivalent surveillance spyware, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0189_EN.html; European Parliament recommendation of 15 June 2023 to the Council and the Commission following the investigation of alleged contraventions and maladministration in the application of Union law in relation to the use of Pegasus and equivalent surveillance spyware, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0244_EN.html.

⁴⁵ European Media Freedom Act, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32024R1083>.

CONCLUSION

Journalists under severe political pressure are at the frontline of media freedom in an era of rising authoritarianism and remain essential to the democratic ecosystem. Their reporting exposes abuses, counters disinformation, and keeps transnational publics informed. Yet they remain vulnerable to multifaceted threats that transcend borders and undermine democratic norms. Protecting these journalists is both a human rights imperative and a necessary defence of the democratic order.

As reaffirmed in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, the 1991 Moscow Meeting, the 2010 Astana Declaration, and Article 19 of the ICCPR, freedom of expression is a fundamental right and a shared responsibility among states. The OSCE and its participating States are recommended to respond with sustained, system-wide reforms that prioritize legal protections, digital security, and durable funding.

Follow-up mechanisms – such as the 2018 OSCE Ministerial Decision on Safety of Journalists – must be fully monitored and implemented. International bodies and donor institutions are recommended to align their mandates with the practical realities faced by JUSPP.