

Testimony of Robert Mahoney

Deputy Executive Director, Committee to Protect Journalists

Hearing on “Media Freedom in the OSCE Region”
U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

October 20, 2021

2:30 p.m.

Dirksen Senate Office Building (Room 419)

Chairman Cardin, Co-Chairman Cohen, and other distinguished members of the Commission, I want to thank you for hosting this important hearing and for inviting the Committee to Protect Journalists to testify.

My name is Robert Mahoney and I serve as CPJ’s deputy executive director. At CPJ, we have been closely tracking the state of media freedom across the OSCE region, including here in the United States. CPJ research shows that journalists and independent media are under attack in nearly all OSCE countries.

Sometimes these attacks are carried out by non-state actors. Consider the jarring case of [Aleksandre Lashkarava](#), who in July was beaten so badly by counter-protesters at an LGBTQ rights parade in **Georgia** that he later died. Georgia has in fact been on CPJ’s radar often recently for the [violent attacks against journalists](#).

Private citizens have also attacked reporters at a number of COVID-related protests in western Europe.¹ Journalists covering demonstrations against COVID-19 countermeasures have been [called](#) “terrorists,” “pedophiles,” “murderers,” and “scumbags.” Protesters have harassed and assaulted members of the press, and told them that “the nooses are ready.”

However, the majority of attacks on the press are by governments.

In **Hungary** and **Poland**, increasingly illiberal governments have captured the media landscape, distorting markets and financially sidelining independent media.

In **Tajikistan**, officials have limited access to news websites, social media and messaging apps.

In **Serbia**, officials have [harassed](#) and allowed [smear campaigns](#) against investigative news outlets.

¹ See: [the United Kingdom](#), [Italy Germany](#), and the [United States](#)

And in **Turkmenistan**, officials have [jailed](#) reporters for their coverage of COVID.

These attacks speak to the grave situation for press freedom in the region. In my brief testimony, I'd like to focus on a few countries where we have seen some of the most severe restrictions.

In **Belarus**, the government of Aleksandr Lukashenko [has used](#) all the traditional tools of the authoritarian regimes to restrict the press — harassment, arrests, detentions, and prosecutions. Most outrageously, it [forced](#) a commercial airplane to land in the capital Minsk in order to detain critical blogger Raman Pratasevich in May 2021. Pratasevich is now under house arrest.

Dozens of other journalists are behind bars, most of them facing long prison sentences on criminal charges. This includes most of the [reporters and staff](#) for the popular news site *Tut.by*, which has been [banned](#) by authorities.

Authorities also [shut down](#) the Belarusian Association of Journalists. This organization monitored and documented press freedom violations, and provided training and capacity building for young journalists, for over 25 years. Its offices are now closed but the group members continue to operate online, putting them at risk of prosecution.

In **Russia**, authorities have used foreign agents laws to target independent media outlets,² as well as foreign media such as [Bellingcat](#) and the U.S. Congress-funded broadcaster Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). Outlets and journalists that reported on mass protests in support of opposition figure Alexei Navalny earlier this year have also been labeled foreign agents.³ All told the Russian [foreign agents register](#) now includes 85 people and outlets, 68 of which have been added since the beginning of 2021.

The intimidation of the press in Russia sometimes extends beyond the journalists themselves. When Roman Dobrokhotov — founder and chief editor for *The Insider* — fled Russia, authorities [went](#) after his family, raiding his and his parents' homes and interrogating the journalist's father and wife.

We have also seen an increase of journalists' imprisonment in Russia, where at least [10 journalists were behind bars](#) in our latest prison census. Some have spent more than a year in detention awaiting trial on spurious charges.⁴

² See: [Proekt](#), [iStories](#) and [The Insider](#),

³ See: [Meduza](#), [Dozhd](#), [Mediazona](#) and [OVD-Info](#)

⁴ See: [Abdulumumin Gadzhiev](#) and [Ivan Safronov](#)

Four of the 10 are in prison in Ukraine's Crimea, where Russian authorities have closed all media outlets that did not share the Kremlin narrative. Since Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, independent journalists have been regularly [targeted](#). At least three Crimean journalists are currently in jail on extremism charges, and an RFE/RL [correspondent](#) is in detention, allegedly tortured, awaiting trial on charges of espionage and treason.

In **Turkey**, [dozens](#) of journalists remain behind bars. The fact that Turkey remains one of the worst jailers of journalists in the world for so many years in a row shows the extent to which the government will seek to control the narrative in the country.

CPJ has also documented an [increase](#) in [physical attacks against journalists](#) in Turkey. For example, we documented Turkish police firing tear gas and rubber bullets into a crowd of journalists [in Istanbul](#). The perpetrators were not held to account in any of these cases.

In addition, many Turkish journalists have [told CPJ](#) that they are unable to obtain press cards. Press cards are essential for journalists in Turkey, particularly for those reporting on politics, those in the field who must frequently present the card to security forces, and for reporters to be able to assert their status as journalists against officials who attempt to mischaracterize their work.

Lastly, CPJ is deeply concerned about targeted murders in the OSCE region.

In **Ukraine**, CPJ has closely monitored the case of [Pavel Sheremet](#), a Belarusian-born investigative journalist who was killed by a car bomb in Kyiv in 2016.

In **Slovakia**, CPJ has supported efforts for justice for investigative journalist [Jan Kuciak](#) and his fiancée, who were targeted and killed for his work.

And CPJ has just returned from a joint mission to **Malta**, where we and civil society representatives again called for justice in the case of murdered investigative journalist [Daphne Caruana Galizia](#).

Without sustained and concerted support for journalists and pushback against attacks on the press, the region will only continue to see a worsening atmosphere for journalism. As such, we would like to make the following recommendations to OSCE participating states:

- Support the mandate of the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFOM), and urge the mandate holder to robustly challenge countries with the worst records on press freedom, including Belarus, Russia, and Turkey.
- Fully implement the recommendations of the [2018 Ministerial Council decision](#) on media freedom, and hold states accountable to their commitments.
- Fully implement the policies and practices recommended in the [October 2020 resource guide](#), released by the RFOM, on the safety of female journalists online.
- Provide safe passage and asylum to journalists at risk of persecution in their home countries.
- Where possible, consider the use of targeted sanctions systems to hold governments within the region accountable for their press freedom violations.

Thank you. I am happy to take any questions you may have or follow up with additional information and recommendations.