



**MEDIA FREEDOM
RAPID RESPONSE**

**MISSION REPORT:
STEMMING THE TIDE OF GREEK
MEDIA FREEDOM DECLINE**



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INTRODUCTION

Media freedom in Greece has experienced a clear period of deterioration in the last few years. In 2022 and 2023, the country ranked as the worst for media freedom in the European Union in the [World Press Freedom Index](#). International press freedom groups have increasingly been warning about the most serious factors contributing to this decline, from the murder of a reporter and threats to journalists to spyware scandal and underlying issues regarding media pluralism and independent journalism. This erosion of media freedoms and the increasing attention of domestic and international media organisations sparked concern in Brussels and beyond and led to a number of initiatives from the Greek government led by the ruling New Democracy party to address the issue.

In this context, the partner organisations of the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) consortium, joined by Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists, coordinated a mission to Greece in the wake of the 2023 election victory of New Democracy to take stock of the latest developments and assess the current state of media freedom and independent journalism. The first aim of the mission was to meet with leading journalists, editors, media unions, academics and civil society actors to receive the most-up-to-date briefings on the biggest challenges facing the media community. The second aim was to meet with state representatives, institutions, political parties and the government's new Task Force on journalist safety, to both assess the impact of and advocate for stronger measures to improve the situation. The mission was held over three days between 25-27 September 2023 in the capital Athens, during which time the delegation of eight organisations met with a range of stakeholders from across the political spectrum. A press briefing was held at the offices of the Journalists' Union of the Athens Daily Newspapers (JUDAN) and a press release summarising the initial findings was published. The mission represented a follow-up mission to an [online fact-finding mission](#) in 2021 coordinated by the MFRR during the Covid-19 pandemic and stemmed from ongoing monitoring, advocacy and support work in Greece of all the eight participating organisations.

This report provides a detailed analysis of the most serious challenges facing media freedom in Greece, exploring the four major systemic themes identified by the delegation. It also provides an assessment of the impact of different measures taken by the government in the last few years to try and address these issues, and offers the first international assessment of the work of the government's Task Force for the safety of journalists, which was established in 2022 after a recommendation by the European Commission. The report also provides multiple detailed recommendations in each of the chapters to both the Greek government and journalists and media workers for steps that can be taken to achieve progress and further stem the tide of media freedom decline in the country. The mission partners hope it will contribute to the debate within Greece about the factors behind the recent period of crisis and offer suggestions for positive reform moving forward.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Media freedom in Greece has undergone a sustained decline in the last few years, amidst the broad-daylight murder of a crime reporter, multiple threats to the safety of journalists, a sprawling surveillance and spyware scandal and numerous vexatious lawsuits and legal threats against media and journalists, with detrimental consequences for Greek democracy.
- These immediate challenges sit atop deeper historical and systemic issues including a problematic landscape for independent journalism, weak media pluralism, prolonged economic threats to media viability, entrenched capture of private media by powerful families and owners with vested business interests, and low levels of trust in media.
- The downward spiral in media freedom in Greece between 2020-2023 dovetails with the election of the centre-right New Democracy party led by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis in 2019. While media freedom faced serious challenges under the previous Syriza-led administration, the climate has deteriorated further under the current government.
- Amidst the pandemic, increased numbers of attacks on journalists covering health-related protests and the manipulation of state advertising to reward media seen as close to the government led to increased concern amongst domestic and international groups, while the health crisis hollowed out the market and further undermined the finances of Greek media.
- However, it was the assassination of Greek crime reporter Giorgos Karaivaz outside his apartment in Athens in April 2021 which represented the hammer blow for media freedom in Greece. While two suspects have been arrested and are due to face trial, the case remains in a state of total impunity and continues to have a chilling effect on the media community and the safety of journalists. The masterminds and the motive of the killing remain unconfirmed. Journalists have also faced arson attacks, physical attacks and violence from police while covering protests.
- A sprawling wiretapping and spyware scandal involving journalists as well as political actors meanwhile placed Greece on the list of EU member states to have abused surveillance tools meant for protecting national security to monitor and spy on journalists' communications. The lack of accountability for this legal wiretapping, as well as for unresolved yet illegal use of spyware attacks on journalists, has severely undermined source confidentiality and journalists' digital safety. Serious questions remain about the involvement of the state in the illegal spyware surveillance of journalists.
- Media carrying out investigative and public interest also face legal threats, including Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) and even criminal defamation charges, which remain within the penal code in Greece. These vexatious lawsuits, often filed by wealthy or powerful individuals, continue to drag legitimate reporting through the courts and take a financial and psychological toll on journalists working in these newsrooms.

- At the wider level, the current Greek media landscape can be characterised by a history of unregulated development, a weak economic market battered by multiple financial crises, combined with the heavy influence and interference of political and economic interests. High levels of concentration of media in the hands of wealthy families and ship owners with varying political connections to the ruling party have contributed to a media ecosystem in which, although there is a high number of media titles, real media pluralism is weak.
- The country's public service media continue to face financial challenges and questions over their editorial and institutional independence. While the previous crisis at the ERT (Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation) has been stabilised, the continued oversight of the broadcaster by the office of the Prime Minister poses obvious questions over its neutrality. Likewise, at the national public news agency, the Athens-Macedonian News Agency (ANA-MPA), political bias is visible and sensitive stories which could damage the government are sometimes ignored, while public interest reporting on certain topics is lacking.
- Entrenched media capture, combined with strong societal and political polarisation and a tendency for heavily opinion-based journalism, contribute to Greece often being the **lowest ranked** country in the EU for trust in media by citizens. This undermines the ability of Greek media unions and groups to advocate and win public support for democratic reforms regarding media freedom. The combination of these challenges means Greek journalism - both in private and public media - face a crisis of credibility.
- While the Mediterranean country benefits from a small but highly professional group of award-winning independent and investigative media publishing vital public interest journalism, these titles remain isolated on the fringes of the media landscape and lack wider public support or readership, despite their recent impact. To retain their editorial independence, many are experimenting with new subscription-based business models which could offer examples for the wider media market.
- Increased scrutiny from the European Union and international media freedom groups in recent years has led to a number of new measures by the government to try and address the situation, including new laws on media ownership transparency and state advertising, and the outlawing of spyware use. Although domestic authorities are verbally supportive of the EU's actions to defend press freedom, the impact of its domestic reforms have yet to be felt and overall the government's response does not reflect the severity of the crisis.
- Though reports by the EU have provided negative assessments of the situation for press freedom, and an EU Committee investigating spyware abuse visited Greece in 2022, progress has been limited and stronger action is required by EU institutions and international partners to steer Greece back towards respect for democratic values on free media.
- While the steep deterioration in press freedom that began in 2020 appears to have petered out, much remains to be done to improve the situation. Steps such as the establishment of a dedicated body for the safety of journalists are a welcome step forward, but one which must be improved moving forward. As the challenges for media freedom and independent journalism in Greece are deeply ingrained, any positive developments will require sustained attention from journalists and media, backed by unions, supported by strong political will from the government. Rebuilding the eroded pillars of media freedom will be no easy task, yet one that is essential for the resilience of Greek democracy.

SURVEILLANCE AND SPYWARE

One of the most serious threats to media freedom in Greece in recent years has been the surveillance of journalists private communications, through both legal and illegal means, and the ensuing threats to source protection. Between 2020 and 2022, at least [13 journalists and media owners](#) in Greece faced illegal surveillance with the highly invasive Predator spyware, and some were subjected to wiretapping by the National Intelligence Service (EYP). While the government continues to deny involvement in the illegal Predator surveillance, many targets were subjected to both wiretapping and then spyware targeting in what appears to have been a coordinated manner, indicating the involvement of the state. Accountability for illegal spyware monitoring has yet to be achieved in any of the documented cases and the so-called 'Predatorgate' scandal has had a deeply damaging effect on online safety and journalistic source protection in Greece.

The first case to come to light concerned [Stavros Malichudis](#), an investigative reporter for Solomon, an independent Greek outlet. On 14 November 2021, a report was published in media outlet EFSYN that documented the EYP's secret monitoring of a journalist who had written a story about a 12-year-old boy from Syria living in a refugee camp on Kos, whose artwork was exhibited in a museum and published on the website of French newspaper Le Monde. The exact form of surveillance used to monitor the communications of Malichudis has not been conclusively determined.

On 11 April 2022, it was then revealed that [Thanasis Koukakis](#), an investigative journalist for CNN Greece who collaborated with several international publications, including the Financial Times and CNBC, had his mobile phone infected between July and September 2021 with Predator, an advanced spyware tool developed by a North Macedonian company. Government spokesperson Giannis Oikonomou suggested the hack had been carried out by an "individual" or private actor and denied that the Greek government had any role. Days later, however, it was revealed that the [EYP had been carrying out surveillance on Koukakis](#) in June, July and August 2020 for what it said were national security reasons. Documents show that when the journalist asked the Hellenic Authority for Communication Security and Privacy (ADAE) to confirm whether his phone had been tapped, the EYP stopped the surveillance the same day. Koukakis did not receive a response to his request to ADAE for a year.

On 27 July 2022, the New York Times [revealed](#) that Nikos Androulakis, a high-profile European Parliament member and leader of PASOK, a major opposition party had been targeted with Predator in 2021, an analysis of his phone by the Parliament's technology experts revealed - which raised the profile the case. On 5 August 2022, Grigoris Dimitriadis, general secretary of the prime minister's office and Kyriakos Mitsotakis' nephew, resigned. Shortly afterwards, EYP director Panagiotis Kontoleon, also resigned "following erroneous actions found in the process of the legal wiretappings." In October 2022, a special parliamentary inquiry ended in stalemate with government and opposition disagreeing on its findings.

In November 2022, Greek newspaper Documento published an article alleging that [at least six](#) journalists, media owners and figures connected to the Greek media industry were among the people targeted with Predator spyware and/or placed under EYP surveillance. The names were on a longer list of 100 names - of which [33 were first published](#) - that also included a former prime minister, current ministers and influential business people, compiled by Documento based on confidential sources who played a role in the surveillance. According to the newspaper, none of the media figures were believed to have been the main target of the illicit surveillance. Instead, they reportedly had their phones hacked to indirectly access data, information, or communications about others. It was not reported when the spyware infections were made. On 13 November 2022, Documento [released](#) another 38 names placed under surveillance that included more journalists.

In December 2022, an audit by the ADAE at telecom company Cosmote confirmed that EYP wiretapped for unspecified national security reasons investigative journalist [Tasos Telloglou](#), who works for investigative platform Inside Story, leading daily Kathimerini and the ANTI television news programme “Special Report”. In October, Telloglou [had written](#) about suspected surveillance and monitoring in connection with his reporting on the spyware scandal. He also claimed that Eliza Triantafillou, his colleague at Inside Story, and Thodoris Chondrogiannos of Reporters United had their whereabouts monitored by authorities.

On 10 January 2023, Greece’s chief prosecutor Isidoros Dogiakos [issued](#) a controversial legal opinion arguing that ADAE, cannot conduct audits of telecommunication companies to find out who is under surveillance by the country’s intelligence agency. Dogiakos went a step further and warned the members of ADAE with criminal prosecution if they continued with their audits. Dogiakos issued his opinion on [a request](#) by OTE telecoms, lodged in the wake of a visit to its headquarters by an ADAE team investigating the wiretapping of the telephones of independent European lawmaker Giorgos Kyrtsos and investigative journalist Tasos Telloglou. After the audit, sources later confirmed to AP that decrees had indeed been issued for lifting the confidentiality of their phone communications.

On 23 October 2023, Supreme Court Prosecutor Georgia Adilini [ordered](#) the transfer of the investigation into spyware from the first-instance prosecutor’s office to the Supreme Court. This unexpected decision came just as the prosecutors in charge of the investigation were about to compare the spyware’s target list with the one of the EYP. Indeed, they wanted to verify potential matches between the 88 owners of the 92 telephone numbers, including several journalists, targeted with Predator, according to data revealed by the Hellenic Data Protection Authority (DPA), and the list of people whose telephone privacy was lifted by EYP. According to recent leaks in the media, the number of common Predator-EYP targets could be as high as 40. The latest articles report that some targets were infected with Predator via text messages sent “within a few hours” from the mobile phone belonging to a political figure “who held an important government office until the summer of 2022”.

On 25 October 2023, a magistrate [summoned](#) former and current members of the independent watchdog (ADAE) as suspects for leaking classified information, according to several officials. Until 2019, EYP fell under the Ministry for Civil Protection. At the start of Mitsotakis’s first term as Prime Minister, he took the portfolio directly under his office and made his nephew Grigoris Dimitriadis responsible for the political oversight. Dimitriadis stepped down in August 2022 over the surveillance scandal, but structurally, nothing has changed, and the EYP remains under the direct authority of the Prime Minister’s Office. Meanwhile, Parliamentary scrutiny is limited: a Permanent Supervisory Committee, in practice, merely has the right to be informed.

Conversations with some of the affected journalists during the mission show that the investigation and prosecution of their criminal complaints stemming from the surveillance against EYP and Intellexa are at a stalemate. The lack of prosecutorial capacity is evidently an obstacle, and one reporter said this enables the government to hide behind the slow pace of the justice system. They also noted that police are doing the bare minimum: many EYP agents are former police officers, so police are not cooperating with the prosecutors. Another journalist had a different perspective: “When you meet with (the prosecutors), they give you the perception that they are willing to do their jobs. They know every aspect in detail.” The journalist raised the possibility of political arm-twisting, presumably in an attempt to run out the statute of limitations: “My perception is that everything needed to prosecute is there, except the political component: I assume there are political pressures to stall the case.” Overall, the cases have had a significant mental toll on the journalists.

Despite alerts and [specific proposals](#), the legislation regulating surveillance has undergone only cosmetic changes or changes designed to let the government off the hook. Among other things, the use of spyware became a felony (previously a misdemeanour), while the sale and possession became a misdemeanour. The selection criteria for an EYP Commander were strengthened and publicity guarantees were provided for in the operation of EYP technical division KETYAK. Finally, the procurement of spyware by the public sector [has been](#) legalised.

Among other problems, the supposed increase in oversight of surveillance operations falls short of what is required: in direct conflict with ECtHR case law, the decision to place someone under surveillance is taken by two prosecutors, who do not have to justify their decisions. There are serious defects to the procedure that allows persons who were surveilled access to (limited) information: they can only be informed three years after the end of the surveillance and following a decision by a panel of three, composed of the head of the ADAE and two prosecutors, including the prosecutor who authorised the surveillance. Greece’s top court [has debated](#) its petition for a declaration of an unconstitutional provision prohibiting the Hellenic Public Prosecutor’s Office from informing those whose phones were tapped by the EYP. A decision by the Council of State is still pending. Another major flaw is the lack of special protection for journalists, who have the right to protect the confidentiality of their sources. Lastly, the law only penalises the use of spyware by individuals or private sector companies, and its use by the security services remains unregulated. The law foresees the adoption of a presidential decree to determine the conditions under which the state may acquire surveillance software. There is no provision for judicial oversight or regulation of subcontracting of spying to private sector operators.

In line with the newly adopted European Media Freedom Act, the European Parliament’s recommendations and the European Court of Human Rights’s extensive case law, we recommend:

- The government and parliament must urgently adopt amendments to the legislation, which will oblige competent prosecutors to justify any surveillance undertaken in the interest of national security that allows for proper scrutiny of its legality and proportionality, set up independent and effective judicial oversight, allow for effective access to information by persons targeted with surveillance by removing the arbitrary three-year time limit and reinstating the sole responsibility of the Hellenic Authority for Communication Security and Privacy (ADAE), and establish specific safeguards for journalists;

- The government should quickly propose, and the Greek president to adopt, the decree - as stipulated in the law - regulating the use of spyware by the state while applying the safeguards mentioned above, as well as repeal all export licences that are not fully in line with EU's Dual-Use Regulation.
- The Greek justice system should bring justice for the illegitimate and illegal spying on media professionals in a swift, independent and transparent manner, by inviting Europol to join the investigations using the evidence provided by the journalists' investigations and treating the specific cases as a felony (rather than as a misdemeanour which expires after five years);
- The government and parliament should refrain from taking any steps that weaken the functional independence of the ADAE, as well other independent authorities (incl. the Data Protection Authority, National Transparency Authority etc.) and ensure these bodies are free to carry out their mandate to investigate wiretapping without any political pressure or arbitrary prosecution of their representatives. The Government should refrain from political interference in the work of Chief Prosecutor.

SAFETY AND IMPUNITY

More than two years after the murder of Greek crime reporter Giorgios Karaivaz, a monument on the scene of the crime reminds passers-by of one of the darkest days for Greek journalism. As time passes, the site has also become a monument to the continuing impunity for this crime. During this mission, the delegation spoke with journalists, editors, relatives and state authorities to understand the ongoing impact of the murder and the status of the investigation. The delegation also reviewed other safety incidents and crimes committed against journalists since the previous online mission to Greece in December 2021. The mission also attempted to learn from authorities which steps have been taken to expedite justice for all crimes committed against journalists, including the murder of Karavaiz, and to promote the safety of journalists in the country. This section outlines the findings regarding these meetings, concluding with recommendations to the Greek authorities. A separate section has been added to cover conclusions regarding the new Task Force on Safety for Journalists, in which Greek journalists unions, government stakeholders and academics collaborate on improved prevention and protection measures.

Threats against journalists

Although Greek authorities do not publish comprehensive data on the exact number of press freedom violations in Greece, journalists interviewed during the mission spoke of a deteriorating situation and increasing threats and attacks in the last few years. There has been a steady stream of alerts by international press freedom organisations on the Council of Europe Safety for Journalists Platform and the Mapping Media Freedom Platform, which have registered 39 and 61 alerts since January 2021 respectively. Most of these attacks remain unpunished.

Threats against journalists have taken many forms. Journalists and media houses are targeted by attacks from anarchist groups. Greece has a history of attacks by anarchists and extremists against public buildings, private enterprises including media houses and journalists homes. Since 2019 there have been eleven such attacks mainly targeting media premises and following the same pattern - premises attacked by night, with no victims. Accountability for these attacks is rare.

Reporters covering protests and demonstrations, especially photojournalists, meanwhile face police violence and violence from protesters. Interlocutors emphasised that police fail to sufficiently protect them from hostile protesters, police hinder their reporting by not differentiating them from protesters and detain them. At times, media workers feel targeted by police which represent a source of aggression and hostility. Journalists covering topics like organised crime, corruption and migration and refugee issues are also vulnerable. Two recent acts of violence and hostility against journalists highlight the risks reporters carry when they cover alleged corruption. In recent years there have been arson attacks and even death threats, assassination plots against them. Physical attacks on journalists by members of the public outside the context of protests remain relatively rare.

Journalists covering migration and refugee issues highlighted that covering migration policy, including incidents such as pushbacks and other violations of human rights at the EU border, has become progressively challenging. A major concern was that Greek authorities impede their work, as they sometimes [suspend](#) altogether or regularly [restrict](#) their access to refugee camps to formal visit in a highly-controlled environment. This practice continued in 2023. Reporters covering migration spoke of law enforcement personnel who act aggressively against them, hinder their work or fail to protect them from individuals who threaten or attack them while they are reporting on the ground. Overall, less cases involving journalists reporting from the Greek islands of refugees and migration topics have been recorded in the past year, a trend confirmed by stakeholders the delegation met with.

Online abuse of journalists in Greece is common, particularly on social media platforms, as in other EU countries. Politicians and public officials from major parties occasionally use hostile [rhetoric](#) and smear campaigns against critical journalists, which are often followed by online trolling attacks. Female journalists are [especially exposed](#) to such risks. However, public denigration of journalists by government officials is currently less pronounced than in other EU countries.

Impunity for crimes against journalists in Greece

According to the presentation shared with this mission by the Task Force on Ensuring the Protection, Safety and Empowerment of Journalists and other Media Professionals, in Greece: *“for attacks that have occurred, the perpetrators have been driven out and justice has been taken (a fact reflected, both in the Observatory on Media Pluralism and the EU Rule of Law Report 2023)”*. The mission was not able to verify this statement, but its research indicates that this is not the case for many reported crimes against journalists. In fact, this claim can in fact not be traced back to the [Observatory on Media Pluralism](#) and [EU Rule of Law Reports](#) on Greece, as neither report mentions data or findings that corroborate this statement.

Based on the meetings with journalists and government representatives, the delegation observes the following issues with regards to impunity for crimes against journalists:

1. Greece currently has two unresolved cases involving the murder of journalists, with seemingly no actions planned to expedite investigations or evaluate the failure to apprehend all responsible actors

Greece is the [only Member State of the European Union](#) with two open cases of impunity for the murder of a journalist. The 2021 murder of Giorgios Karaivaz saw [two arrests](#) of suspected assassins in April 2023. However, the pair have not yet been brought to court and no tangible progress has been made towards arrests and prosecution of the masterminds of the crime. The 2010 murder of Sokratis Giolias also [remains unresolved](#). In meetings with government representatives, the mission inquired about the reason for these delays of justice and asked what steps will be taken to guarantee a successful prosecution. While the delegation respects the confidentiality of ongoing criminal investigations, it notes that the representatives of the Ministry of Civil Protection and Justice did not indicate that evaluations or analyses were ongoing to determine the cause of the delays and identify opportunities to expedite the investigations.

In line with [European case law](#) about cases involving the investigation of murders of journalists, states should be able to provide highly plausible and convincing reasons to justify the excessive length of proceedings and take all measures available to it to pursue successful prosecution. Some of such measures have been suggested in the [European Commission Recommendation on the Safety of Journalists](#), such as the establishment of special police units and training of investigative officers. In meetings with government representatives, the mission did not receive information about the intention to adopt such measures. The delegation inquired about the existence of a special protocol for the investigation of crimes against journalists, as has been suggested in several [international instruments](#), but was informed that such protocol is not in place nor scheduled to be implemented.

2. Comprehensive data on impunity for crimes against journalists is lacking

The mission heard that the Ministry of Justice has access to reports of crimes filed by journalists in relation to their work through its statistical service. However, the ministry was not able to provide such data and many stakeholders, including journalists and unions, reported that they have not been able to obtain such data via government bodies. The mission encourages the plans of the Government Taskforce to improve data on safety for journalists in Greece in collaboration with its academic stakeholders, and highly recommends that data concerning impunity for crimes against journalists is included. Moreover, data gathering efforts should also consider cases which are currently not being reported to the police. Several journalists cited procedural thresholds as the reason for not filing a report. For example, one mentioned that filing police reports after online threats is highly time-consuming as separate reports have to be filed for each online threat. Two journalists mentioned that in some cases, police do not start an investigation but instead solve the case informally, without a police report being made. It was also mentioned that the perception among journalists that crimes against journalists always go unpunished in Greece, discourages them from filing reports with the police. Lastly, the delegation was told by two editors-in-chiefs, who spoke on the basis of anonymity, that they typically do not file police reports when their staff is physically attacked in relation to their journalistic work.

3. The journalists with whom the mission spoke report that, as a rule, criminal cases they have filed after safety incidents have not led to arrests or court proceedings
4. Despite international legal obligations, transparency around investigations is lacking. Both victims and the general public are insufficiently informed, further exacerbating the chilling effect of impunity.

As comprehensive data is missing, the mission was not able to include an impunity rate for reported cases of attacks on journalists in Greece. However, all journalists interviewed indicated that they were never informed of arrests or convictions in their case. This is in line with the finding that most of the cases of physical attacks and threats reported on the Council of Europe Safety for Journalists and the Mapping Media Freedom Platform remain unpunished. Moreover, journalists who have become victims of attacks report that they are poorly informed about the status of the investigation and often do not hear from police authorities after having filed a report. Public announcements about steps taken or the status of investigations are also scarce, including in the cases of murdered journalists Giorgios Karaivaz and Sokratis Giolias. News of the arrests made in the case of Karaivaz in April 2023 were not announced in a formal press conference, but in a message on the personal Facebook-page of the Minister of Justice.

While secrecy laws do apply for confidentiality concerning police investigations, case law of the European Court of Human Rights confirms that police do have to allow a degree of public scrutiny over the investigation. As the European Court of Human Rights has confirmed in several cases, in addition to immediate relatives of the victims, the public must also be informed to such an extent that it can hold authorities to account in cases of misconduct or failure to investigate.¹ The Greek authorities' silence and consistent referral to the secrecy of investigations are therefore not acceptable, particularly as the lack of updates about investigations of crimes against journalists suggest that the perpetrators are not being pursued, potentially exacerbating the chilling effect of these crimes on other journalists.

5. As was noted in the Rule of Law-reports of 2022 and 2023 by the European Commission, there is no independently appointed oversight body monitoring the public prosecution, including the prosecution of crimes against journalists. The body authorised to do so, the Prosecutor of the Supreme Court, remains a political appointment.

The Rule of Law-country reports on Greece of both 2022 and 2023 pointed out the lack of involvement of the judiciary in the appointment of the highest positions in the judiciary and prosecution. This is not an issue specific to the investigation of crimes against journalists, but several interlocutors raised this issue in light of the role of the Prosecutor of the Supreme Court in addressing the persistent impunity for crimes against journalists. By law, the Prosecutor of the Supreme Court is the highest oversight body over the public prosecution, and thereby uniquely mandated to oversee the quality of prosecutorial investigations and to intervene in inadequate prosecutions. Interlocutors reported this office is in practice reluctant to intervene in ongoing cases, and hesitant to do so as to avoid the insinuation of political interference, given its appointment through presidential decree. Similarly, in meetings with government officials it was mentioned that they are not able to investigate why prosecutions of perpetrators of crimes against journalists are not yielding (prompt) results, as they are not able to access this information across cases due to the independence of the prosecution. As long as the prosecutor does not take up this role, or an independently appointed authority is established in line with the recommendations from the European Commission, this accountability gap remains.

Recommendations on safety

In line with the [case law](#) of the [European Court of Human Rights and the European Commission's Recommendation on the Safety of Journalists](#), the mission recommends:

- The Public Prosecutor should dedicate additional resources and seek assistance from international bodies such as Europol in the case of the murder of Giorgios Karaivaz;
- The parliament and government, especially the Ministry of Civil Protection and Justice, should prioritise and commit to prompt, effective and independent investigations of crimes against journalists by dedicating additional resources and staff to these cases, recognising their special nature and impact on the public sphere;
- The Prosecutor of the Supreme Court should commission an independent evaluation of all unresolved cases of attacks against journalists, including cases involving police violence, the conclusions of which should be publicised;

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¹ Ramsahai and Others v. The Netherlands. App. 52391/99 (ECtHR, 15 May 2007), par. 353; Giuliani and Gaggio v. Italy. App. 23458/02 (ECtHR, 24 March 2011), par. 303

- The newly established spokesperson of the Prosecutor of the Supreme Court should take a leading role in the regular dissemination of information about investigations to restore faith in the commitment to justice and ensure greater transparency about ongoing investigations, in particular towards the victims and their families.

Task Force on Ensuring Protection of Journalists: Need for further steps forward

In July 2022, the Greek government established the Task Force on Ensuring the Protection, Safety and Empowerment of Journalists and other Media Professionals to help implement the EU Recommendation and the Council of Europe Recommendation on the safety of journalists and the various UN resolutions on this issue. The Task Force is the result of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between six Greek ministries in May 2022 (General Secretariat for Communication and Information, the Presidency of the Government; General Secretariat for Justice and Human Rights, the Ministry of Justice; General Secretariat for Public Order, the Ministry of Citizen Protection; General Secretariat for Demographic and Family Policy and Gender Equality, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs; General Secretariat for Telecommunications and Post, the Ministry of Digital Governance; and General Secretariat, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and representatives of journalist unions and associations, universities, public service media, news agencies, and other relevant stakeholders².

The Task Force aims to pursue the objectives of the MoU, that have been developed in line with Commission Recommendation (EU) 2021/1534 on ensuring the protection, safety and empowerment of journalists and other media professionals in the European Union. Hence, the main goals of the Task Force, as described in the MoU, can be summarised as follows:

- Monitor the situation on the safety of journalists in the country;
- Promote legislation, public policies and other actions, such as training, to promote the safety of journalists, with a special focus on women, youth, local and digital media, and take into account the recommendations proposed by the Task Force's members to address the main challenges;
- Promote multi-stakeholder coordination and collaboration.

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² The Task Force consists of the following representatives: the Secretariat General for Communication and Media; the Ministry of Justice; the Ministry of Citizen Protection; the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs; the Ministry of Digital Governance; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation; the Athens – Macedonian News Agency; the Department of “Communication, Media and Culture” of Panteion University; the Department of “Communication and Media” of National and Kapodestrian University of Athens; the Department of “Journalism and Media” of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki; Journalists’ Union of Athens Daily Newspapers; Journalists’ Union of Macedonia and Thrace; Journalists’ Union of Peloponnese, Ipirus and Islands Daily Newspapers; Journalists’ Union of the Daily Newspapers of Thessaly, Central Greece and Evia; Panhellenic Association of Journalists’ Union; Journalists’ Union of periodical and electronic Press; the Union of Press Photographers – Greece; the Panhellenic Sports Press Association; the Foreign Press Association of Greece; the Union of Private Television Technicians of Northern Greece; and the Union of Private Television Technicians of Attica.

Since its creation, and according to the Secretariat General for Communication and Media of the Presidency of the Government, with whom the delegation met during the mission, the main actions taken since its creation have been the creation of an [International Training Centre for the Safety of Journalists and other ME Professionals](#), the development a survey on the needs of Greek journalists in relation on their safety, organise and/or support to training, and the development of protection measures to be taken by the public service broadcasting. In summary, and in the words of the Task Force Chairman, Dimitrios Galamatis, “our biggest achievement is intangible, the osmosis between different media professionals and sectors: authorities, professional associations, media, universities, etc”.

While the establishment of this Task Force for the protection of journalists, being the first time all relevant stakeholders are speaking about these issues at the same table, is a step in the right direction, the MFRR mission concludes that the Task Force needs to take the following steps towards strengthening its operations and transparent activities:

- Greater human and financial resources should be effectively implemented. While the Secretariat General for Communication and Media of the Presidency of the Government provides administrative support, there is no time-bound specific budget assigned to this initiative.
- Develop a more concrete and measurable work plan, concrete objectives, and timeline to pursue its objectives. The MFRR mission identified the lack of concrete specific and measurable indicators to measure the impact.
- Improve transparency. The Secretariat General for Communication and Media of the Presidency of the Government prepared a report to the EC as part of their obligation to report on the implementation of the EU Recommendation after 18 months from its approval; however, according to some of the interviews undertaken during the mission and the [Foreign Press Association of Greece](#), the report was not agreed among all members of the Task Force and shared with all of them before submission. Also, the Task Force should proactively publish these reports.
- Greater communication. The MFRR mission found that most Greek journalists are unaware of the existence of the Task Force. The Secretariat General for Communication and Media of the Presidency of the Government recognised that raising awareness about the existence of the Task Force has not been a priority. The mission believes this should be swiftly prioritised to ensure all media and journalists in Greece can benefit from its work.
- Stronger focus on SLAPPS. The mission has identified SLAPPs as one of the most worrying trends in Greece, but the Task Force has not taken action on this particular issue. Therefore, the Task Force needs to promote legislative actions and support the recently created SLAPPs Observatory by the Journalists' Union of Athens Daily Newspapers, and use the data for its work to address SLAPPs.
- Strengthen monitoring of attacks to have data and information on the state of safety of journalists in Greece. While there is a proposal to create an observatory in cooperation with universities, which seems to be a good approach to ensure its independence, currently there are no funds available for this, making the effective implementation of this initiative improbable.

- Reporting to international monitoring mechanisms. The Greek government has had an active role in the development of international standards on the safety of journalists, in particular at the UN Security Council and at the UN General Assembly, where Greece plays a leading role in the drafting of these safety of journalists resolutions that have increasingly strengthened the international standards on this issue. The Task Force can support the development of the reports on the implementation of these resolutions, in which Greece has not engaged in a systematic manner, as well as provide inputs for SDG Voluntary National Review (SDG indicator 16.10.1).

SLAPPS AND LEGAL PRESSURE

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) and other forms of legal pressures and threats are among the most serious factors that are negatively affecting journalists in Greece. The response of the government to this issue has been limited and much more needs to be done in this regard, both in terms of potential domestic legislative remedies as well as in terms of awareness raising and support to targets of SLAPPs. A number of recent legal cases involving serious criminal charges against journalists and media actors further darken the legal landscape for the exercise of free and independent journalism in Greece. Despite constitutional protections, the legal landscape can be strengthened. While understanding of SLAPPs has been increasing in Greece in recent years, more also remains to be done to document and address these kinds of frivolous lawsuits.

SLAPPS and criminal lawsuits

Both the 2022 [EU Rule of Law report](#) and earlier MFRR [reports](#) identified SLAPPs and legal threats as one of the problems affecting media freedom and journalists in Greece. This assessment was largely confirmed by the mission. During the interviews, the mission heard from journalists who have been targeted by SLAPPs. As in many other countries, politicians and powerful businesspeople were identified as the main authors of these vexatious lawsuits. In addition to SLAPPs, in a number of cases criminal lawsuits were also brought against journalists and arrests were threatened. There is no systematic collection of data vis-à-vis these lawsuits and therefore information about SLAPPs relies on direct testimonies and on the cases that reach international attention.

One of them was the independent media outlet [Altheress](#) from Thessaloniki, which in 2020 reported about the first-instance conviction of two Greek executives of a gold mining company. Altheress was sued under GDPR law in October 2021, one year later, by one of these executives for [reporting what the plaintiff claimed was sensitive personal data](#). In fact, the media outlet had simply reported the first instance convictions in open court and without reporting restrictions. The verdict was annulled in the second instance. However, despite the initial report following all international standards, the judge found the journalist, Stavroula Poulimeni, [guilty](#) at the end of March 2023 and it ordered them to pay 3,000 euros in compensation for damages. This verdict was appealed and a final decision is expected in April 2024. In the meantime the lawsuit is ongoing. The journalist said that in the future she would be afraid to write names of people convicted in open court again, that the procedures take a long time, and this has a serious psychological impact. A second case concerned journalist Maria Panagiotou, of the newspaper Dimokratia, who faced several lawsuits initiated by an important Greek-Israeli businessman for amounts ranging from 350,000 to 500,000 Euros. Even if eventually they were acquitted by the Supreme Court, the procedure lasted for more than two years and this was mentally and financially very demanding.

MFRR representatives examined two more cases concerning Thodoris Chondrogiannos and Nikola Leontopoulos, both journalists at investigative platform Reporters United. In 2022, a recycling company sent a legal note before the publication of an article by Reporters United, with the aim of stopping the publication. Reporters United stood behind their report, the article was published and eventually no lawsuit was initiated by the company. Earlier on in 2020, [the same recycling company](#) had initiated a SLAPP and claimed 80,000 euros plus interests on defamation charges against Chondrogiannos and the media outlet he was working for. The case was eventually dismissed by the court in 2023 which confirmed the accuracy of the investigation. The company did not appeal.

The two journalists of Reporters United were later targeted in another [SLAPP](#) initiated by Grigoris Dimitriadis, the former Secretary General (and nephew) of the Greek Prime Minister, following his resignation from office. The resignation came after the illegal surveillance cases linked to the Predator spyware scandal. Dimitriadis initiated lawsuits for defamation claiming 400,000 euros of damages against the two journalists. Besides the journalists at Reporters United, the journalist Thanasis Koukakis - who was himself a spyware victim - and the newspaper Efimerida ton Syntakton (EFSYN) were also targeted by such lawsuits. Koukakis was sued for sharing a tweet linked to a media report. The MFRR had already intervened in this case and earlier on the case was also reported by [CASE, the Coalition against Slapps in Europe](#). The case was heard in court in Athens on 25 January 2024. After the mission was concluded, Dimitriadis filed another [multi-million-euro lawsuit](#) against journalists from Reporters United and EFSYN.

During this time, Greece saw more SLAPPs documented than most other EU member states, according to CASE and MFRR data, underscoring the severity of the issue in Greece. Documentation of such cases is ongoing. On a positive note, the SLAPP phenomenon in Greece has increased the solidarity amongst journalists, in particular investigative journalists. Media actors now talk to each other about SLAPPs and this has generated psychological support amongst targeted journalists.

Besides SLAPPs journalists have also faced criminal lawsuits in recent years, such as in the Novartis case, where Kostas Vaxevanis, publisher of Documento newspaper, Ioanna Papadakou, a former investigative journalist for To Vima newspaper, Ioannis Filippakis, publisher of newspaper Dimokratia and Alexandros Tarkas, a reporter at Dimokratia, were criminally charged of, amongst other crimes, being members of a criminal organisation aimed at fabricating stories about the Novartis scandal. According to Greek law, such charges could have led to prison sentences of approximately 20 years. Eventually they were [acquitted](#) in June 2022 as the Judicial Council of the Supreme Court considered their charges baseless and declined to send the case further to trial. After the mission ended, in early November 2023, Vaxevanis and one of the newspaper's journalists, Vangelis Triantis, were then summoned as suspects as part of a criminal investigation into "possible offence of the use of official secrecy" in connection with their investigative reporting.

In December 2023, after the mission was completed, Documento [announced](#) it had received a fine of 435,000 euros from the Independent Authority of Public Revenue (AADE) in relation to discounts the newspaper had allegedly given for advertisements in 2017. After Documento's appeal, the fine was reduced to 240,000 EUR. The fine was condemned by the newspaper as politically motivated and aimed at crippling its business. The newspaper planned to appeal the fine in court. The validity of the claim will be assessed in court.

Accused by an airport officer of making a false bomb alert, the Franco-Canadian freelance journalist based in Greece, Romain Chauvet, has been sentenced by an Athens court to a six-month suspended prison sentence for "disseminating false information" on 26 October 2023, after the mission concluded. The reporter went to the airport with an official authorization to cover the arrival of Canadian citizens from Israel after the attack by Hamas and asked the airport officer for more information on the flight. He was convicted in a word-against-word procedure without solid evidence, according to Reporters Without Borders. Albeit not targeting a journalistic publication, the verdict potentially represents a dangerous precedent in the application of the law against fake news. It was the first time in several years this legislation was used to convict a journalist.

Impact of SLAPPs on journalists

Many of those interviewed during the mission seemed confident in the positive outcome of those lawsuits, even in cases where the judges found that mistakes had occurred, the sanctions, in financial terms, have been relatively mild. Some of the interviewed journalists stated that “judges in Greece are very careful with journalists’ cases in court. Even when they decide there was a mistake, they are careful with the amount of money imposed”. Indeed legal standards foresee that journalists can name names in particular if in the case there is a [public interest](#) and this would not justify proceedings against them.

The frivolous character of the lawsuits and the fact that in many cases might be rejected are not the main concerns of journalists in Greece. Journalists in Greece are more concerned by the psychological impact of such lawsuits and by the fact that preparing an adequate defence requires a great amount of resources both in terms of time and money. In addition journalists stated that they have to be constantly in court and this is severely testing their psychological resilience. The chilling effect was clear as journalists openly told the mission that they will be afraid to write names again out of fear of unjustified legal retaliation.

In addition, due to the legal structure of online portals and the fact that the law holds accountable all those sitting on the board of such organisations, the impact of a SLAPP goes beyond those writing articles and it could indeed put at risk the whole media outlet in case this is a NGO. As one of the journalists wrote the “lawsuit has destabilised us [...]. It is also an existential crisis”. As a result of SLAPPs, journalistic portals may have to change their internal organisation and legal structure to avoid everybody in the board being liable to lawsuits. In particular for NGOs this impact can affect not only freedom of expression but the same right to association.

SLAPPs have an additional impact on journalists in Greece. The editor-in-chief of a leading newspaper stated that they can rely on “significant firepower” in terms of institutional legal support from their publisher and therefore they are not too concerned by SLAPPs. The same was confirmed by Kostas Vaxevanis, journalist and media owner whose investigative newspaper Documento produces investigative journalism in Greece. The impact of SLAPPs is instead much more damaging in the case of relatively new and smaller journalistic initiatives in Greece. For independent, freelance journalists or NGOs and other organisations, relying on project funding or unsteady income, the impact of a SLAPPs can be a major threat, both in terms of possible damages to pay but also because the time spent in courts is not a productive time.

It is legitimate to conclude thus that SLAPPs disproportionately affect smaller and independent journalistic projects in Greece, rather than well-established and more financially stable media outlets with wealthier owners. Considering the fact that many of these smaller projects focus on investigative journalism, the negative impact is twofold: on one side, it negatively affects the pluralism of media sources in favour of large media, and on the other it also threatens independent journalism on public interest topics like environmental protection, corruption, migration and similar sensitive areas.

The response of institutions

Against this background, the response of the Greek authorities has failed to materialise. To date, the government doesn't seem to have taken any decisive steps to tackle the SLAPPs as envisaged in the [April 2022 European Commission Recommendation](#), which calls on member states to protect journalists and human rights defenders who engage in public participation from manifestly unfounded or abusive court proceedings.

Given the impact in terms of time and resources of SLAPPs on journalism in Greece, the possibility of an early dismissal of SLAPPs would be a welcome step. However, the mission did not identify evidence of such practice by the Greek courts. All those interviewed confirmed that cases were either pending, some of them for years, or that they had reached a final decision. In a similar way, the mission was not made aware of any support initiative, like free legal aid or psychological support, which could help journalists deal with SLAPPs. On a more positive side, as reported by the journalists themselves there has been a certain restraint by the judicial authorities in applying penalties in those cases when journalists were found to be liable.

In this regard, the most significant development has been the creation of an Observatory on SLAPPs, which was announced in the context of the [Task Force](#) created by the government to support journalists (see section above on measures to protect the safety of journalists). The Observatory is an initiative of the Panhellenic Federation of Journalists Association (POESY) and it is the result of the mobilisation of journalists and awareness raising that was created within the Task Force. The Observatory was established by a decision of the Board of Directors of the POESY and it aims at recording, denouncing and publicising SLAPPs, to exert pressure for changes in the legal framework in line with the expected EU Directive and to cooperate with European and Greek organisations to put barriers to this phenomenon. Other objectives of the Observatory also include the education and training of all those involved in cooperation with legal professionals.

POESY has created a [form](#) on its website where SLAPPs can be recorded. Journalists victims of SLAPPs can submit in full confidentiality information on their cases. However, the cases will be processed only for information purposes. In addition to the form, POESY also provides [information](#) on SLAPP cases and other SLAPP-related news and it collects relevant information on [legislative developments](#) related to SLAPPs.

While this initiative is a welcome tool to gather information and at the same time to raise awareness on SLAPPs, at the moment it appears to be the only one aimed at countering SLAPPs. It is also significant that many journalists didn't seem to be aware of it as they also seemed to be unaware of the government's Task Force. More initiatives will have to be developed to provide support for journalists and tackle the problems of SLAPPs.

Conclusions and recommendations

In the course of the mission, the delegation was informed about possible legislative changes like removing suspended sentences for first instance conviction for defamation. The representatives of the Ministry of Justice sitting in the Government Task Force confirmed that this is in reality a bill of law and that they are considering the abolition of the criminal offence of defamation while retaining the one of libel. It was confirmed to the mission that the suspensive effect of such convictions will remain in place and moreover that the implications of the chilling effect on journalists will also be taken into consideration. For this reason, the mission recommends to the Greek government and parliament to:

- Ensure that amendments to the rules applicable to criminal defamation do not have an inadvertent negative impact on press freedom and ensure adequate time for public debate and consultation of Greek and international stakeholders to provide their input on pertinent legislative changes.

It is clear however that the response to SLAPPs by the Greek state is to date inadequate. Besides the Observatory on SLAPPs there has been no other significant initiative aimed at improving the situation of journalists in Greece. There is no early dismissal of SLAPPS, there is no award of damages to affected journalists, legal aid as well as psychological support for journalists are lacking. The Greek state to date has not yet undertaken any measures to tackle SLAPPs. The initiative of the Observatory on SLAPPs and the activities conducted under the Task Force remain unknown to many journalists who feel that they are targeted by powerful actors and have no support or assistance whatsoever.

It is the responsibility of the Greek state to remedy the current situation. A first step should be of a political nature: political leaders in Greece should invite their own party affiliates to stop suing journalists on frivolous and abusive grounds. While legitimate protection of reputation in response to defamatory reporting is of course credible, retaliatory legal filings aimed at suppressing watchdog reporting must be avoided. Such a gesture could have immediate positive effects. For this reason, the mission recommends that:

- The current political leadership in Greece publicly shows restraint and commits not to initiate abusive and frivolous lawsuits against journalists.

A second step would be to implement the measures recommended by the European Commission in April 2022 for the purpose of addressing and mitigating the effects of SLAPPS. The mission therefore recommends that:

- The government, parliament and judicial bodies take effective, appropriate and proportionate measures to address manifestly unfounded or abusive court proceedings against public participation, in line with the European Commission's April 2022 Recommendation

Finally, considering the fact that many members of the journalist community were unaware of the work of the Task Force and the different initiatives conducted in this context, it becomes important that the Greek government engages with the journalistic community in sharing information on the steps taken. For this reason, the Greek government should:

- Provide transparency on the steps taken by publishing its forthcoming report to the European Commission on the implementation of the April 2022 Recommendation.

These are only preliminary recommendations. Their implementation however would send an important signal to the journalist community while at the same time showing that a sincere effort had been undertaken to improve the media freedom in Greece.

MEDIA PLURALISM AND INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM

Media ownership and transparency

Undercutting the immediate challenges outlined so far, the Greek media ecosystem continues to suffer from multiple longer-term and systemic challenges that negatively affect the landscape for independent journalism and press freedom. Many of these issues can be traced to the country's prolonged financial and economic crisis, which has severely weakened the media market and deepened the toxic entanglement of media with vested political and business interests. Although Greece has a relatively well-developed legal framework, many challenges also stem from the deregulated development of the media market in previous decades. While the modern Greek media market remains densely populated and vibrant, political polarisation is deeply ingrained within the media ecosystem and media pluralism is weak despite the large number of media outlets. News reporting that risks damaging the message control of the government, including reporting on topics such as refugee pushbacks or human rights violations, is largely absent in the mainstream media, particularly television.

Much of the Greek media landscape can be characterised by a relationship of interdependency between media owners and political elites - the ruling New Democracy party in particular. Many major print and television channels are owned by familial dynasties and magnates in the country's lucrative shipping industry, many of whom have political connections and cross-ownership interests in industries dependent on state contracts. These political and financial relationships of these owners expose their media to potential conflicts of interest and weaken their editorial independence. This has contributed to a media ecosystem in which, although there is a high number of media titles, real media pluralism is weak and independent journalism which fulfills its watchdog role has been pushed to the fringes. During the mission, one stakeholder at a legacy newspaper described media ownership as "the elephant in the room" in discussions about media freedom. The firewalls between editorial newsrooms and owners, though never historically strong in Greece, have in some cases been diluted. Greece does not have laws or self-regulatory mechanisms to limit editorial independence or protect journalists from unjustified dismissals by ownership. As a result, although direct acts of censorship are understood to be rare, self-censorship is understood to be common within the journalistic profession and certain topics are understood to be off-limits.

Greece has historically suffered from non-transparent ownership of media outlets by beneficial owners with connections to political parties and other vested interests. In the last few years, several regulatory and legal reforms have been implemented by the government to try and address these issues. Positive changes recognised by the mission include the new Registry for Print Media (MET) and Registry for Electronic Press (MHT), which aim to improve the transparency of media ownership, including beneficial ownership. Under a new system, media not registered in these bodies are not eligible to benefit from state advertising or other forms of state support. The Ethics Committee and the Directorate for Media Oversight likewise represent a new approach, which will hopefully have a positive impact on improving media ethics. However, so far the impact of these changes remains unclear and public access to the registries remains challenging. The mission heard criticism that the platform had not been updated and is not user-friendly. In the field of media regulation, the independence and competence of the National Council for Radio and Television (NCRTV) regulator also remains in doubt. The NCRTV, the country's main broadcast regulator, also faces challenges due to a lack of financial resources, which limits its ability to carry out its mission. No concerns were raised during the mission about regulatory decisions or discriminatory sanctions by the body against broadcast media. Legislation that prevents high ownership concentration is lacking.

State advertising and support

State advertising to media in Greece, though not the dominant source of income for media industry like in some other EU countries, has long suffered from politicisation and meddling. In the last two years, the New Democracy government responded to a financing scandal and has undertaken welcome efforts to better regulate the distribution of public funds to the media. During the COVID-19 pandemic, advertising distributed via a third party agency on behalf of the state was shown to have been [manipulated](#) to reward media close to the ruling party. Amidst the lockdown the government allocated €20 million to the media to carry public health messages. It outsourced the distribution of these funds to a private company. After public pressure, the government released the list of media outlets and sums they received. This was dubbed the Petsas List - named after government spokesperson Stelios Petsas. [Analysis](#) showed that many outlets perceived as “opposition” media received disproportionately lower levels of advertising compared to more government-friendly media, despite the fact that many had higher circulation and readership. Of the 1,232 outlets that receive financial aid, instead included more than 200 digital entities not listed in the country’s Online Media Register, including inactive or non-existent websites or obscure blogs with little or no readers. This scandal underscored a wider issue over the non-transparent allocation of state support to media down political lines.

In 2022, the New Democracy government passed a [new media law](#) establishing new rules for the distribution of state advertising in both printed and electronic press. Under this new system, media that are not listed with the media registries would be barred from receiving any form of public money. The government also issued a Joint Ministerial Decision that regulated the distribution of direct subsidies to media. These reforms - aimed at improving the transparency of media support from the state - were seen as a response by the government to the ‘Petsas List’ scandal and are recognised by the mission as a positive step. However, their effectiveness remains to be seen. In 2023, a new scheme for state support to national, regional, and local media was implemented by the government. However, some of the criteria used for state advertising to media in Greece is still not clear, meaning the system remains open to abuse, despite improvements. Watchdog Vouliwatch has campaigned for years for transparency and accountability of the use of public money in the Petsas List case. In October 2023, it [appealed](#) to the European Court of Human Rights for full transparency and access to all data and criteria on which the money was allocated.

As well as from political interests, Greek media outlets have historically been vulnerable to pressure from corporate advertisers, as well as the banking industry. Though the topic is not often discussed publicly, it is common knowledge within the industry that advertisers seek to influence news output, undermining media independence. In an anonymised [survey](#) conducted by the Incubator for Media Education and Development (iMEDd) 80% of Greek journalists said that they self-censor while doing their job. The survey concluded that this resulted from a cultivated “culture” of avoiding certain topics or powerful business interests. The banking sector, powerful business owners, and companies dominating the advertising market are, to differing levels, regarded as off limits at legacy and major media titles. This pervasive self-censorship among journalists due to external pressures negatively affects the ability of the press to carry out its watchdog role. Mission participants met with colleagues from iMEDd during the visit and participated in the organisation’s annual journalism festival.

Public service media

Multiple requests by the mission partners to meet with management representatives from the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation (ERT) as part of the visit to Athens did not receive a response. In Greece, the country's public media have faced decades of challenges stemming from both political and economic pressures. Despite a period of overall stabilisation after a prolonged crisis under previous governments, questions remain over the independence of the country's public service broadcaster and national press agency, the Athens News Agency/Macedonian Press Agency (ANA-MPA). While efforts at depoliticisation under the current government have been partially successful, critics argue this process sometimes comes at the expense of public interest reporting.

The ongoing oversight of the ERT and the Athens-Macedonian News Agency by the office of the Prime Minister continues to call into question the institutional independence of both bodies, despite ostensible safeguards. This oversight by the General Secretariat for Information and Communication, supervised by the PM's office, was one of the first measures taken after New Democracy was elected in 2019. The measure was justified at the time as stabilising the broadcaster and reducing political partisanship, which had been continued under the previous government. Konstantinos Zoulas, the former head of his party's press office, was appointed by the prime minister as ERT president, posing accusations of overt political interference. Serious questions remain over the competence of a government minister over the appointment of the management of the broadcaster. The ERT's CEO, president and its board of directors are appointed unilaterally by a government minister. Under this new management system, the general assessment of media experts and media representatives spoken to during the mission is that ERT has become more professional and less politicised - which are welcome developments. At the same time, public-interest reporting is perceived to have declined, and the broadcaster continues to suffer from a lack of institutional independence, making it vulnerable to political influence.

In addition to political pressures, ERT has also faced long-term economic challenges which limit its ability to carry out its public interest mission. On a positive note, at least 800 new staff were hired at the broadcaster's different channels between 2019-2022. However, these contracts are subject to renewal every 6-12 months, creating a partial culture of employment instability. Overall, public interest reporting at ERT is lacking and serious topics go unreported, indicating self censorship or more overt forms of censorship and an aversion to sensitive topics which could damage the government. Coverage of the spyware scandal was cited during the mission interviews as a principal example. Although the scandal involving the alleged state surveillance of a journalist was revealed in April 2022 ERT did not report on it until March 2023, when an opposition was revealed to have been spied on. Others pointed to the lack of coverage about international allegations of illegal pushbacks of refugees and migrants by Greek authorities in the Mediterranean. While the government argues its policies since 2019 in depoliticising the broadcaster, critics see this as a subtle form of control, although one less aimed at overtly promoting a political agenda. As a result, despite the dedicated work of many journalists within the broadcaster to inform citizens, the broadcaster continues to suffer from low levels of public trust which will take years to rebuild.

The ANA-MPA meanwhile also faces challenges from political oversight and a lack of independence from politics. Although the influence of the ERT on the Greek media ecosystem has been diminished over time, the power of the ANA-MPA in shaping news content in the country remains high. The agency's content amounts to almost 80% of all news content in Greek media. This role in the production and dissemination of news has made it a more important body for control by successive governments. The main form of political influence over the agency continues to come from government appointments to its management board. The board of directors is made up of nine members, the majority of whom are appointed by the government. Like ERT, the agency was put under direct prime ministerial control in 2019. Under this system, it has faced accusations of a selective approach to news dissemination. In November 2022, the Journalists' Union of the Athens Daily Newspapers (ESIEA) issued a [statement](#) criticising the repeated violation of the journalistic principle of pluralism by the ANA-MPA. The union said it received regular complaints about how the agency presents current affairs only through the responses of government officials, without reference to the news that prompted the response or to statements that complete the picture. It is also criticised for lack of news critical of the New Democracy government. The political control over the national news agency is one of the principal forms of "message control" used by the Greek government.

Independent Journalism: Conclusions

The toxic capture of the fourth estate and the symbiotic relationship between major media owners and political elites in Greece is as problematic as in many of the EU's worst offenders for media freedom. Due to the dependence of many media owners on the state and the web of personal connections with media owners and political figures, self censorship is common and the ruling party already enjoys relatively favourable media coverage at the national level, particularly in the television market. These factors mean Greece exhibits a partial level of media capture, particularly within the private media landscape. Other elements of media capture, such as capture by government and state actors of public media, the system of state advertising to the press, and media regulation, are more limited in the case of Greece, though serious challenges persist in each area. While the country benefits from a small but highly professional group of independent and investigative media who have broken away or formed their own small platforms in recent years, these titles remain isolated on the fringes of the media landscape and lack systemic support. High quality watchdog and investigative journalism is being conducted in Greece on a daily basis. Yet all too often this content is drowned out by tabloid-style, opinion-based reporting. On other occasions, major revelations made by these investigative media are ignored or spun in a way to reduce potential damage for the government. Perception of the influence of commercial or political interests over the work of the media is high. The combination of these many challenges means Greek journalism faces a crisis of credibility, being one of the EU countries with the [lowest level](#) of trust in media by citizens. The challenges of pluralism and media independence are among the most complex to address and any positive developments in Greece will require action and responsibility from journalists and media, backed by unions, supported by strong political will from the government.

Recommendations to government:

- Ensure stringent implementation and monitoring of the new law governing the fair allocation of state advertising and all forms of state support to media, and ensure all funding to media through third party agencies is also distributed in a fair and transparent process, down market rather than political lines, in line with the provision in the EU's European Media Freedom Act (EMFA).

- Make public in full the information and decision-making process into the criteria used to create the pandemic-era 'Petsas List' of state support to media titles and end obstruction of legal attempts to seek accountability over the issue.
- Provide adequate financial resources to the National Council for Radio and Television (NCRTV) to guarantee it has capacity to effectively monitor and regulate the broadcaster sector; ensure all appointments to the regulator are made down professional criteria rather than political affiliation; limit all efforts by political forces to influence the NCRTV
- Increase transparency over media concentration and strengthen legislation to limit high levels of both vertical and horizontal ownership concentration in the media landscape in an effort to bolster real media pluralism. Ensure greater oversight of media acquisitions under competition law and ensure media pluralism is a key assessment criteria for future sales.
- Review the need for oversight by the office of the prime minister of ERT and ANA-MPA. Establish a new system for appointments to supervisory and management boards of both institutions. Strengthen rules about the professional criteria of those able to be appointed to both bodies. Enhance safeguards for firing or replacement of management and editors at ERT and ANA-MPA to limit political meddling
- Strengthen the support fund for public interest, regional, community and investigative journalism in Greece through public grants, which is distributed on a tender basis through a third-party body with representation from journalistic and media experts

To the media and professional unions:

In media owned by wealthy and politically-connected commercial interests, particularly in legacy broadcast and print media, work to strengthen internal safeguards and firewalls to prevent all forms of interference of owners and other politics and business interests, while also protecting editorial independence and journalistic freedoms and discouraging self-censorship; ensure journalists who speak out against censorship practices are given full support and financial aid to fight labour claims in court.

ROLE OF UNIONS AND IMPORTANCE OF SOLIDARITY

In Greece, there are several journalists' unions with a long history of trade action:

- Journalists Union of Athens Daily Newspapers - JUADN,
- Journalists Union of Macedonia and Thrace - ESIEMTH,
- Journalists Union of Periodical and Electronic Media (ESPIT)
- Journalists Union of Daily Newspapers of Peloponnesus, Epirus and Islands -ESPIT
- Journalists Union of Central Greece and Euboea Daily Newspapers - ESIETHSTEE

All the above unions are affiliated with the [Panhellenic - Federation of Trade Unions of Journalists](#) (POESY). There is also the Greek Foreign Press Association (FPA), the only officially recognised organisation for foreign media representatives in the country.

In Athens, the delegation met with representatives of the Union of Journalists of Athens Daily Newspapers, including its president Maria Antoniadou, as well as the Vice-President, Secretary of Special Affairs and the President of the Printing Press Union. The delegation also met Sotiris Triantafyllou, President POESY.

The Greek media ecosystem has been weakened by the long-term financial and economic crisis in the country, which deepened the unfavourable position of journalists' weak social and labour protections, but also deepened the toxic intertwining of the media with political and business interests. The economic insecurity of journalists in Greece, caused by low wages and weak industry protection, makes media professionals more vulnerable to editorial pressure. Economic weaknesses in the media market also expose the Greek media to capture by vested interest groups, both political and business.

At a time when Greek journalists are working in press freedom conditions rated as among the worst in Europe, the financial crisis and the crisis of media pluralism are deepening, and the division in society is partly reflected in the division of the organisations that represent journalists in Greece. While the unions do continue to wield influence and engage individually on valuable initiatives, the fragmented nature of national union representation - which is split between regions and mediums - undermines the ability of the Greek media community to speak in one voice and advocate for better working conditions and pay. Greater cooperation is needed between the country's differing media unions. Many journalists working in the country's newer independent media were critical of a perceived lack of action by the unions in fighting strongly enough for journalistic rights and freedoms.

In its report on the Rule of Law published in July 2023, the European Commission warned that attacks and threats against journalists persisted and that the professional environment for journalists had further deteriorated. This cited physical attacks, threats, arbitrary detention, criminal charges and surveillance. The EC recommended that Greece establish legislation and other safeguards to improve journalists' physical safety and working environment. The drive for stronger media freedom in Greece cannot be disconnected from the push for less precarious working conditions for journalists and media workers. The greater the financial stability for individual journalists, the less susceptible they will be to editorial pressures.

The need to join forces between journalists, trade unions and media freedom organisations to improve the safety of journalists is a common objective shared by all, which would strengthen the solidarity in the profession. Concrete activities include legal and financial support for the family of the murdered journalist Karavaiz from JUADN, as well advocacy for the investigation to be completed and for the masterminds and perpetrators behind the murder to be brought to justice. The unions also played a key role in successfully correcting the legislation regarding fake news and the police protocol that restricted journalistic reporting on protests. PFJU is developing an [Observatory](#) for SLAPPs and an Institute for training journalists. They also plan to establish a Media Council in Greece. The International Safety Training Centre for Journalists, established in Thessaloniki, can also be a useful tool to improve cooperation with European organisations. All major unions also sit on the government's Task Force and have contributed to the body's initiatives and meetings.

Union representatives emphasised during the mission that Greece should be treated fairly by different media freedom organisations in Europe and asked for more communication and cooperation to ensure their views on cases of media freedom violations are taken into account. The mission offered cooperation in strengthening the Observatory for SLAPPs and exchange of experiences on existing systems for protecting the safety of journalists.

CONCLUSIONS

As outlined in this report, media freedom in Greece has experienced a marked and sustained decline in recent years. The four themes outlined in this report have been identified by the mission as the most significant factors behind this period of deterioration. Individually, each would represent a problematic development justifying increased scrutiny and attention. When considered together, and against the existing backdrop of limited media pluralism and systematic weaknesses in the Greek media market, these factors present an alarming picture for media freedom and the rule of law in an EU member state. While the Greek government has responded with some legitimate and well-meaning reforms, these are limited in scope or not reflective of the severity of the crisis facing Greek journalism. The effects of other reforms - including on media ownership transparency and the transparency of state advertising - have yet to be felt. In other areas, little or no action has yet been taken or, as regards the surveillance of journalists, the Greek state is the principal source of the threat.

The toxic combination of these factors makes Greece stand out within the EU as exhibiting the clearest decline in media freedom in the last three years of any member state. Regarding the safety of journalists, Greece is the only EU country to currently have two open cases of impunity for the murder of journalists. The lack of accountability and total impunity for the killers represents a dark stain on the country's press freedom record, which must be urgently addressed. Meanwhile, almost no other country in the EU has experienced such a high number of physical attacks which endanger the safety of journalists in the last few years. While SLAPPs are by no means a Greek phenomenon and are spreading across the EU, a disproportionate number of cases have been documented by monitoring groups in Greece. At the same time, in terms of independent journalism, Greece's exhibits a high level of capture of private media by wealthy owners with connections to political elites who operate in a symbiotic relationship to suppress overtly critical journalism. Despite the vast number of media outlets, particularly in the fragmented digital market, real pluralism is weak and certain public interest topics are chronically underreported. Greece is by no means alone within the EU in experiencing these systemic challenges. However, the conclusion of the mission is that no other EU Member State exhibits the same problematic entanglement of these four systemic issues.

The overall result within Greece is a palpable sense of insecurity amongst many in the journalistic community, in terms of safety, legal threats and working conditions. It must be noted that despite these many issues, high-quality watchdog journalism is being conducted on a daily basis in Greece, both at media outlets in the grouping of smaller independent outlets and larger legacy titles. Journalists continue to work in challenging conditions to fulfil their public interest role and hold power to account. Greek media have won European awards for their courageous reporting on public interest issues such as refugee pushbacks. However, the failure of the state to create safe working conditions and the suffocating pressure of vested political and business interests has hollowed out the space for the fourth estate to operate freely and independently. Watchdog journalism has been pushed to the fringes. As a result of these contributing factors, the quality and credibility of Greek media has also suffered in recent years. This has serious knock-on effects for Greek democracy and society more widely.

The mission concludes that unlike in other EU member states identified as presiding over serious challenges for media freedom, the current Greek government has demonstrated some willingness to first recognise the issues and then take steps to remedy them. The same cannot be said for other EU governments. However, the unavoidable conclusion is that the measures taken so far are limited in scope and do not match the seriousness of the challenges the country faces regarding its media landscape. In spite of this, Greece should not be considered amongst the list of EU countries in which the government is actively seeking to cement overwhelming and systematic control over the information space. Instead, the factors behind the problematic landscape for media freedom stem from a mixture of historical weakness in the development of the media market, rule of law issues, societal polarisation and flaws within state institutions, made worse by undemocratic or problematic government policies and the ruling party's attempts at ensuring message control. The mission therefore concludes that media freedom in Greece is salvageable, with sustained political and the cooperation of political, media, union and institutional actors, as well as journalists themselves. At the same time, it must be recognised that serious reform will only be achieved through democratic governance which understands the value of pluralistic and watchdog journalism in society. The mission hopes the recommendations presented in this report will be thoroughly considered and the delegation looks forward to further communication and cooperation with all relevant stakeholders in Greece who remain committed to ensuring a central pillar of Greek democracy - the freedom of the media - is defended and sustained.



**MEDIA FREEDOM
RAPID RESPONSE**