

AEJ Media Freedom Representative's Report for the Maastricht Congress 2009

Overview

Regaining the AEJ's Observer status with the CDMC and developing close relations with the CoE were among the main goals set when the AEJ Assembly voted in Dublin in 2007 to support the work of an AEJ Media Freedom Rep, and confirmed me in the position. I am pleased to report that those goals have been achieved.

In the past year the AEJ has played an active and sometimes central part in Council of Europe activities for freedom of expression in the media:

In May, on behalf of the AEJ, I tabled an [amendment](#) at the CoE's ministerial meeting on media in Reykjavik, Iceland, which led to the adoption of a text in which member states pledged to conduct regular reviews of their anti-terrorism laws and practices to ensure they conform with CoE standards.

I was commissioned by the CoE Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) to write a wide-ranging report entitled "Respect for Media Freedom" detailing murders and assaults on journalists, and other severe violations of media freedom, in Europe over the past three years. The report was welcomed by the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly when I presented it in the Luxembourg Parliament in October.

In March and October I attended scheduled sessions of the CoE's Steering Committee on Media (CDMC) in Strasbourg.

CoE Media Ministers meeting in Reykjavik

The conference, at the end of May, focused on "A New Notion of Media?", internet governance, and a resolution on anti-terrorism measures and their effect on freedom of expression. [Details](#) are on the CoE website.

I also took part in a high-level meeting in Reykjavik of the Forum of NGOs, including other leading media and human rights groups as well as the AEJ, held one day before the ministers' conference. The Forum exerted pressure on the ministers on the anti-terrorism issue. The Forum's statement was widely circulated and publicised at the time. Helen Darbishire of Access Info Europe later wrote on behalf of the whole Forum to the new CoE Secretary-General to press for evidence that the resolution pledge on reviewing anti-terror laws was being implemented. The Sec-Gen's reply was welcome but not fully satisfying. The Forum, including the AEJ, will remain engaged on the issue.

Respect for media freedom – my report to the Parliamentary Assembly

The "Respect for Media Freedom" report was warmly received by the parliamentarians on the PACE Media Sub-Committee of the Committee on Science, Culture and Education. It will be used, with other contributions from media and human rights NGOs, as a basis for a planned new mechanism for closer monitoring and "naming and shaming" member states that persistently allow persecution and violence against journalists. If all goes to plan, the PACE may pass a resolution about next January to spell out their next steps and press the Committee of Ministers to put more political commitment into the issues.

At the Luxembourg meeting on 26 October the Parliamentary Assembly members also formally received and welcomed Hans-Martin Tillack, who presented the European Charter on Freedom of the Press. The Charter is open for signature to any AEJ members or sections who wish to do so individually. Earlier this year it was approved by the European Commission's Commissioner for the Media, Viviane Reding. Details and the full text of the [report](#) are on the Parliamentary Assembly's website.

Council of Europe Anti-Discrimination and the Media Campaign

Zdenko Duka, Croatia, was the AEJ Representative during the Council of Europe meetings in Strasbourg about the campaign, [Speak Out Against Discrimination](#). Many representatives of journalist associations, press councils, media regulatory bodies, radio and television networks, media researchers and owners, as well as of minority organisations, gathered at the international symposium on journalism and information in early October. The goal was the promotion of diversity, media promotion of ethnic and other minorities, introduction of educational media minorities programmes, and programmes for easier access to employment for minorities.

The AEJ earlier submitted written [reports](#) on this issue from our Armenian, Croatian, Polish, Turkish and UK sections, with a further report from Russia specially written at our request by Anna Sevortian of the Moscow Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights.

Other activities and website news items

In [November 2008](#) the AEJ sent a letter to President Sarkissian of Armenia calling urgently for a full and effective investigation into an assault on AEJ member Eduk Baghdasaryan, and the country's fulfilment to of its international commitment to do everything possible to bring to justice those guilty for all assaults on journalists.

In [August 2009](#) an AEJ website item registered a landmark press freedom victory in Ireland. The Supreme Court ruled in favour of the editor and a reporter of the Irish Times, who had refused a demand to reveal their sources for an article about an investigation into the financial affairs of former Prime Minister Bertie Aherne.

Also in August 2009, the AEJ Media Freedom Rep wrote to the UNHCR Office in Turkey calling for all possible support to be given to the appeal of Mrs Delbar Tavakoli Vaskas, an experienced Iranian journalist who fled her country for fear of persecution, to be granted asylum. This followed a similar message from the AEJ Turkish section.

NEW: A report on media freedom problems in Ukraine by AEJ contact Arthur Rudzintsky.

Future outlook

The AEJ session with CoE Human Rights Commissioner Hammarberg at the Maastricht Congress is a good opportunity to establish closer links with his office and the CoE as a whole, on issues of media freedom and independence.

Several sections have submitted questions and points to be raised with Mr Hammarberg – including cases of violence against journalists, misuse of libel and defamation laws, media access restrictions and editorial interference arising from over-concentration of media ownership. These issues will be tackled in the AEJ's future focus on media freedom. All sections are urged to play an active part in our surveys and campaigns!