

AEJ MEDIA FREEDOM REPRESENTATIVE'S ANNUAL REPORT TO AEJ GENERAL ASSEMBLY IN BRUSSELS, 23 NOVEMBER 2013

By William Horsley

Review: In the past year the AEJ has been increasingly active in the field of media freedom, reflecting the serious concerns of members in all parts of Europe and seeking to influence the policies of particular governments and of the main European institutions concerned with those issues. Media freedom (MF) in Europe has been badly buffeted by major storms related to mass surveillance of communications and moves by some governments to tighten press regulation by laws and politically-influenced media regulators as well as continuing large-scale job losses and much-publicised issues with the quality of reporting and analysis in media in many European countries.

Worst of all, patterns of threats and acts of violence against media workers have become a dangerous new norm in some countries, including cases of police violence at street demonstrations, attacks on individual journalists and media properties, threats from criminal groups and arrests and imprisonment of journalists for their work. All of these are unlawful and were condemned in unusually strong language in the Council of Europe media ministers' conference in Belgrade on 7-8 November. For details, see News items on www.aej.org and the Council of Europe's website www.coe.int – including an account of the UK's failed attempt to delete a key passage of the Resolution of Internet Freedom related to the risk of security agency operations undermining the security of the Internet itself.

The frameworks of legal protection for journalists in national laws, in the European Convention on Human Rights and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) as well as the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights, look excellent on paper but are proving severely inadequate in the face of this array of threats and deliberate attacks on media freedom and on the safety of journalists. The AEJ regularly publicises topical problems through our website and coordinates actions with other media and press freedom organisations; also through our activities as an Observer in the Council of Europe's CDMSI media steering committee, and as an organisation of independent media professionals which is often consulted by inter-governmental bodies.

Future actions and potential for increasing the AEJ's impact on MF issues: The next CoE Media Steering Committee meeting will be in Strasbourg from December 3- 6, 2013. The Agenda and Meeting Reports of the meetings are on <http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/media/> .

As AEJ MF Representative I took part in the work of the informal drafting group of the CoE Media Steering Committee preparing the Safety of Journalists Resolution which was approved by European ministers in Belgrade this month. It is the strongest text so far agreed by Member States. It also paves the way for the follow-up work of a formal working group, which should prepare proposals for more dynamic and concrete actions by the Council of Europe for monitoring of MF violations, physical protection measures for journalists under threat, and measures to stamp out impunity (systemic failures to bring those responsible for violent crimes against journalists to justice) . The AEJ has been asked to continue its active role with the CoE for these objectives.

Monitoring: Sections and Members should be aware of the new proposal, by CoE ministers and officials, that the AEJ and other professional media groups and NGOs be asked to contribute directly,

with authoritative first-hand information, to a future online media platform (website), which may be set up in the near future to track suspected serious MF violations as they happen across the whole of Europe.

MF Highlights of 2012-2013:-

August 2013: The Association of European Journalists joined many other journalistic and free expression organisations in supporting an Index on Censorship Petition calling on European leaders to take action to stop the US and other governments from carrying out mass surveillance.

July: AEJ Honorary Vice-President Dogan Tilic took part in the International Freedom for Journalists Congress in Istanbul and he was elected as chair of that congress. He read a message from AEJ President Eileen Dunne expressing solidarity with scores of Turkish journalists in jail because of their work. The AEJ has been part of numerous campaigns for the release of jailed Turkish journalists.

June 2013: AEJ Secretary-General Tibor Macak was a panelist at the European Commission's SpeakUp!2 conference on freedom of expression in the Western Balkans and Turkey. Several other AEJ-ers also took part and the event was reported in full on our website..

May 2013: AEJ Media Freedom Representative and AEJ national sections were invited to take part in a European Commission consultation among Stakeholders on the Commission's response to the January 2013 report of the EU High Level Group on Media freedom and Media Pluralism.

May 2013: Many AEJ Sections staged or took part in special events, debates and data publications to mark World Press Freedom Day on 3 May. AEJ Media Freedom Rep was invited to the international WPFDay event in Costa Rica.

February 2013: AEJ was a co-organiser of the MEDIADEM Conference presenting their findings on media freedom and independence: trends and challenges in Europe. Several AEJ representatives took part.

OTHER FORMS OF AEJ COOPERATION WITH THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE: The AEJ was invited to send applications for any of our members with an active interest in Hate Speech issues, to take part in a CoE seminar on that topic in early November 2013. Several AEJ members responded.

MF activities and National Sections: Vigorous efforts are made to keep Sections and interested members informed about MF activities, through an informal AEJ Media Freedom Network; AEJ Newsletters; consultation on current issues and opportunities to take part in European-level special events and conferences. This year, as each year since 2007, the AEJ Congress and Assembly are partly devoted to debates and an exchange of views on current urgent topics related to Media Freedom. Lots of topical information on all aspects of MF activities and events is posted on the website, which Kristina Hristova (AEJ Bulgaria) is currently web-mastering. Please go to www.aej.org for Updates.