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Harrassment of media threatens democracy

As the world marks World Press Freedom Day on 3 May, the outlook is unfortunately glum. The state of press freedom and freedom of expression continues to decline in countries around the world – also in countries known as stable democracies.

“The democratic immune system needs a boost and must rise to the occasion if freedom of the media is to prevail,” says Jesper Højberg, executive director of International Media Support.

“The targeting of media and journalists is no longer reserved for authoritarian leaders. The disturbing development where the work of independent media and the legitimacy and credibility of journalists is constantly discredited and discouraged has become more visible within the past year. It is a tendency we must take extremely seriously because it threatens our democratic society.”

That the situation is serious is confirmed by new statistics and reports from Reporters without Borders (RSF), Freedom House and The Economist Intelligence Unit who all monitor the state of democracy and freedom related rights. In the Democracy Index 2017, published by the latter, 89 countries are regressing compared to the year before. Already, last year’s numbers from Freedom House indicated that 45 per cent of the world’s population lived in areas where the media are not free, and less than every seven lived in a country with a free and independent press.

“In countries where press freedom and independent media already are in dire straits, we observe how authoritarian leaders now learn from each other and not only continue locking up journalists, but also block access to specific media and online services and make use of the tax authorities and laws on national security to contain and stifle critical reporting. This happens in countries like the Philippines, Russia, Egypt, Turkey and Azerbaijan,” says Jesper Højberg.

“Unfortunately, we also see how politicians in European democracies change the legislation to tighten their control of the media and thereby limit press freedom. And it is extremely troubling that two journalists have been killed on European ground within the past year due to their critical investigations of corruption and abuse of power in Malta and Slovakia.”

This year’s global theme for World Press Freedom Day focuses precisely on the role that media play in society by keeping authorities accountable. It also underlines the responsibility of state institutions towards the public in terms of ensuring transparency and accountability.

“Luckily, journalists across the world continue their work despite the challenges. But if free and independent media - which constitute an essential component in a democratic society – are to survive, the other parts of the democratic system must come to their support. Government, the judicial system, civil society, citizens like you and me – we must all step up in support of press freedom. Through our media habits, we are part of securing the continuous survival of the free,

independent media and their critical investigations so crucial to holding to account our decisionmakers,” says Jesper Højberg, executive director of International Media Support.

3 May is also an occasion to remember the 46 journalists who have lost their lives in 2017, not to mention the 30 journalists who have been killed already in the first months of 2018, the latest attack of which claimed ten journalist lives in Kabul, Afghanistan in late April.

For further information, contact Line Wolf Nielsen: +45 5210 7800 or lwn@mediasupport.org

International Media Support (IMS) is a non-profit organisation that works to support local media in countries affected by armed conflict, human insecurity and political transition.

www.mediasupport.org