

Research Report 2

The role of Member States in ensuring freedom of the press in autocratic regions

In autocratic regions, one group has unlimited power, authority, and influence (“Autocracy”). In 2022, the world has noticed an increase in authoritarian leadership. An annual report published in 2021 by Varieties of Democracy stated the world was experiencing the lowest levels of democracy since 1978 (“The Shifting”).

Freedom of press is a human right dictated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 states, “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (“Universal Declaration”). However, in autocratic regimes, where only a certain opinion is allowed, press is often censored.

On March 14th, 2022, Russian reporter Marina Ovsyannikova barged onto a live set with a sign saying, “no war”. As this went against the law in Russia that bans spreading “fake news” about the war and prohibits anyone from calling the war an “invasion”, she was questioned for 14 hours. On August 10th, 2022, Ovsyannikova was charged with spreading fake news (Bellware and Jeong).

To support freedom of press in autocratic regions, the German newspaper Die Welt hired Marina as a freelance correspondent. International media coverage also followed the reporter’s story and spread awareness about the lack of freedom of press in Russia. Nevertheless, as this was occurring in another member state, no definitive action could be taken.

On October 2nd, 2018, the journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who routinely criticized Saudi Arabia’s government, was murdered. A United Nations investigation concluded the order to end Khashoggi’s life came from the Saudi Arabian government in an attempt to silence his opinions. Member States internationally condemned the killing of Khashoggi. Furthermore, the United States, Canada, France, and England levied sanctions against 18 Saudis who were linked to the killing. Nonetheless, President Trump did not cut ties with the country and continued with the Saudi Arabia and United States alliance, important for oil supply, military contracts, and trade, regardless of the connections between the crown prince and Khashoggi’s killing. Germany, Finland and Denmark cancelled arms deals with Saudi Arabia after the killing (“Jamal Khashoggi”).

Member States can ensure freedom of press is achieved by first ensuring their own countries respect the 19th article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Laws should not prohibit or punish journalists from expressing their opinions, neither should governments restrict freedom of expression on social media (Repucci). They should adopt initiatives such as that of The Netherlands, PersVeilig, which protects the rights and freedoms of journalists (PersVeilig).

Member States should thoroughly investigate any attacks on journalists to check on autocratic governments. Furthermore, they should support multilateral institutions such as regional courts (“Strengthening press”). Courts such as the African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights and the European Court of Human Rights play crucial roles in protecting

journalists' safety in unsafe regions. Hence, supporting these institutions will allow them to better protect freedom of press ("Press Freedom").

Member States play an influential role in ensuring freedom of press in autocratic regions. By holding these authoritarian regimes accountable for their actions, Member States can ensure this human right is upheld (Deane).

As Member States will have different stances on the issue, delegates are urged to consider the issue from the point of view of the delegation itself. The question asks for the role of Member States to defend freedom of press outside their nation's borders. That is, the extent to which a breach in freedom of press should be dealt with by other Member States. Delegates are required to propose a resolution on how Member States might go about this issue, recommending specific strategies to ensure freedom of press. Delegates should take into account that the issue specifies that freedom of press will be defended "in autocratic regions".

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