

Safeguarding European Freedom of Speech and Freedom of Press

The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party convening in Amsterdam, the Netherlands on 1 to 3 December 2017:

Recognises that:

- everyone has the right of freedom of expression and free communication. This includes the freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers, and respect for their private life, their home and their correspondence, as protected by the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, as adopted by all members of the Council of Europe;
- global press freedom as ranked by Freedom House declined to its lowest point in 13 years in 2016, with unprecedented threats to journalists and media outlets in major democracies, where European states Poland, Turkey, Hungary and Serbia were amongst the countries that suffered the largest decline.

Believes that:

- freedom of speech and freedom of the media and the Internet are essential in a democracy, allowing for the free exchange of information and ideas, and for the citizenry to hold government accountable.

Notes with severe concern:

- the worrying developments in several European countries towards more political interference and restrictions on the freedom of speech and the freedom of press, including, but not limited to;
- the increased intolerance toward independent or critical reporting by the ruling Polish Law and Justice (PiS) party, as well as excessive political interference in the affairs of public media, and restrictions on speech regarding Polish history and identity, which has led the European Commission to start legal action against planned reforms of the Polish government;
- government critical Hungarian media outlets being put under increased government pressure, and several outlets being bought up by government affiliated owners, creating a clear pro-government bias in ownership and content in the Hungarian media;
- a campaign by the Serbian government and its allied media outlets to portray investigative and critical media as foreign-backed propagandists, and a series of threats and intimidations directed at

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journalists in Serbia prompting a statement of concern from the OSCE in September 2016;

- the Turkish government, using the enhanced powers granted by a state of emergency, carrying out an extensive purge of media outlets accused of links to an attempted military coup in July 2016, and adopting restrictive legal and regulatory changes including a state advertising policy barring official advertisements in media linked to loosely defined terrorism charges;
- reports of continued attacks, threats, censorship, arrests, and prison sentences against both journalists and ordinary citizens in Russia, who had posted or shared politically sensitive information online, and Russian legal amendments that increased penalties for promoting “extremism” and other offences;
- the continued deterioration in recent years of the media environment of Azerbaijan, where the government uses arbitrary charges and investigations to imprison prominent journalists, bloggers, and freedom of expression advocates, and where violence against journalists has become common and generally goes unpunished.

Condemns:

- the recent killing of Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia as a shocking attack on freedom of expression and a culmination of an assault on the rule of law and democracy in the middle of Europe.

Calls for:

- the European Parliament as well as the European Commission to continue to closely monitor the level of media and Internet freedom inside the EU as well as to encourage framework conditions for a pluralistic media landscape;
- EU Member States, especially current and future holders of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, to regularly address rule of law as part of their meeting agendas;
- the EU not to hesitate to use the sanctions already available, such as Article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty, and to deploy new sanctions such as the withholding of funds from the EU budget, when dealing with Member States who are restricting their citizens’ freedom of speech and freedom of press in breach of European law;
- the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers to firmly deal with those member states, such as Turkey, Azerbaijan and Russia who are violating the human rights protected by the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and to not allow signatory states to ignore the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights without consequence;

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- all ALDE member parties to incorporate into their political work respect for the citizen's rights to freedom of expression, free communication, privacy and the inviolable right to a fair trial at every political level in order to create a liberal and open society, and to continue to fight for these values on their respective domestic arenas;
- Malta's government to carry out an independent, thorough and transparent investigation of the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia. The integrity of which would be best proved by inviting investigation officers from the EU Member States as the faith in the police has been shaken after a series of police scandals in recent years.

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