

assemblea

OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Freedom of Expression, Media and Information

22-23 June 2020

SESSION III: Freedom of the Media

Intervention of the Catalan National Assembly (Civil Society Organization)

My name is Jordi Vilanova, and I speak on behalf of the Catalan National Assembly, a grass-roots organization defending the right to self-determination of the Catalan people.

On October 14th, the Spanish Supreme Court handed down prison sentences for nine Catalan civic and political leaders, with terms going from 13 years' jail for the former vice president of the Catalan government, to 9 years for civil society leaders—the former president of our own organization, the Catalan National Assembly, and the president of Òmnium Cultural.

The massive civic protests that followed the sentences after October 14th were met with unprecedented violence by police forces. The Spanish government deployed thousands of police officers in Catalonia, including the paramilitary Guardia Civil, in order to keep repressing the pro-independence movement.

According to the Catalan Ministry of Health over 750 protesters were injured due to Police violence, including 71 journalists, one of which was taken into custody . A week later, the Council of Europe High Commissioner on Human Rights denounced the violence, destruction of recording equipment, and arrests of journalists by the police forces.

Only a month later, the regular Report on freedom of the media to the OSCE Permanent Council included Spain among countries such as Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, which obstructed, brutalized or detained journalists while trying to inform the public.

In January 2020, during the UN Universal Periodic Review to Spain, the United States, Sweden, and the United Kingdom made recommendations to ensure the protection of journalists by Spanish authorities during the exercise of their profession. Sweden also joined many others such as Canada, Iceland, Switzerland in expressing their concern on the abuses under the Citizen Protection Law, known as the “Gag Law”, especially in relation to journalists and civil society, both issues relating to the Catalan question.

A particularly relevant case is that of photojournalist Spain Jordi Borràs, who has extensively documented far-right movements in Spain and was attacked by an off-duty police officer in July 2017. Even though the officer was identified, and the Barcelona administration asked for a two-year jail sentence against him, he is still in active service.

The Council of Europe's 2020 Report on the protection and safety of journalists has denounced threats, attacks against media professionals at protests in Spain, as well as forcing journalists to reveal their sources in response to media investigations that shed light on matters of public interest, including weapons exports and corruption.

Furthermore, Reporters Without Borders has urged the repeal of the Spanish Gag Law since its implementation, and recently criticized a state-endorsed poll which asked the citizens if they would support limiting freedom of the press in order to combat fake news, as well as the lack of transparency by the government during the COVID19 crisis.

Amnesty International has also been denouncing the 5 years of Gag Law abuses, not only because of its consequences in the deterioration of the freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, but because it allows the administration to use, and I quote, "imprecise legislation that favour police unaccountability, provokes self-censorship in the press and de-mobilizes the population".

The Coronavirus confinement has further affected the freedom of the press. On April 1st, 2020, over 400 journalists signed a manifesto denouncing the restrictions to freedom of the press, as they claimed the Spanish government was "filtering" questions during COVID19 press briefings, and was supported by the International Press Institute. This institution denounced physical attacks against a journalist by far-right VOX protesters in Málaga on May 23rd.

Moreover, on May 6th, the Professional Supervisory Council of Spanish Public Radio and TV News, denounced political interference in programming, as in the case of an interview with jailed Catalan leader Oriol Junqueras scheduled to be aired, in the context of the lack of political support for PM Pedro Sánchez extending the state of alarm deadline. The Supervisory Council openly stated that "postponing the interview would remove its value and it is an attack on the freedom of the press".

The strong military presence in daily COVID19 briefings during the crisis coupled with a nationalistic message funded by millions of euros of public funding. Private broadcasters received a transfer of 15 million euros, a decision that is being investigated by the European Commission. Meanwhile, Primer Minister Sánchez has announced expenditure of one hundred million euros, with an additional 30% of funding for media advertisers, jeopardizing press independence.

All these cases evidence the rapid deterioration of the right to freedom of media in Spain. For this reason, the Catalan National Assembly calls on the Spanish authorities to respect, protect and promote the right to the freedom of information and the press, and for the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media to support the call of international organisations to repeal the Spanish Gag Law.