

EFJ Annual meeting in Moscow 2014

By Mogens Blicher Bjerregård

The European Federation of Journalists has taken significant steps in the past year to steer the organization towards a future that will see a more democratic and united Europe. Through our past experience, we learned that the best way to manage the future is to be part of it – that is to create our future together.

Representing more than 300.000 journalists, the EFJ has a duty to implement, investigate and drive the democratic processes forward within the organization and beyond. As a Europe's largest journalists' organization, we have the ambition to become one of the key stakeholders in influencing media policy and labor policy in Europe. After all, our goal is to make journalists' voice heard.

In order to make a difference, we need a strong and efficient organization in both of its political and in the administrative performances. One of the first and major steps to achieve this was the decision taken in last September to appoint a new, full-time general secretary to further consolidate our capacity. But we must bear in mind that the secretariat has limited resources and capacities to perform all the tasks with only a few numbers of staff.

The most important topic this year has been the crises in Ukraine. None of us would have predicted such a situation with a great impact on all of us all in Europe. November last year I attended the conference I Kiev about union building, organizing and collective bargaining in the southeast part of Europe. I was happy to welcome the two Ukrainian unions in our organization, but the last night we might sense the change as the former president of Ukraine denied to sign the agreement with the EU.

It turned worse, more than 160 journalists have been violated on their job and in February this year, I as EFJ-president was leading a joint international mission to Kiev. It happened that we arrived just when the revolution took place at Maidan. The mission in February ended with hope, but shortly after, Ukraine turned into a war situation first in Crimea and then in Eastern Ukraine, and we haven't seen the end of it.

Journalists from both Ukraine and Russia are facing a huge challenge in doing their jobs. They are working in the atmosphere of fear. The safety for journalists in Europe is worse than ever before. Today, it is more dangerous to be a journalist than in the First World War. Since our General Meeting in Verviers in Belgium, 10 journalists have been killed in Russia and Ukraine while doing their jobs, including seven journalists and media workers from Russian, Ukraine and Italy have three Russian journalists. In additions, hundreds of journalists have attacked and threatened.

Elsewhere in the world, journalists are also facing dangers. We will not forget about the 3 French journalists who were killed in Mali and Central Africa, and a German and Swedish journalist in Afghanistan.

During the last 18 months I have participated in several meetings about safety. In November 2013, I attended the ministerial conference in Belgrade about press freedom, safety and surveillance. I took the advantage to address the situation about the jailed journalists in Turkey and the violation of the rights of journalists to protect confidential sources at the UK Guardian media.

In September, I attended the 9th Internet Governance Forum in Istanbul, where UNESCO brought safety to the table as an important issue. The digitization has made it much more difficult for journalists to protect their sources and do their job without being tracked by the authorities or other powerful entities. It has becoming more difficult to carry out investigative journalism. This issue was addressed in Istanbul and again at the conference in London in October organized by the NUJ UK & Ireland in cooperation the Guardian and the IFJ.

Recently I attended the UN Inter Agency meeting in Strasbourg about safety and the campaign to end impunity against journalists. Many NGOs have made a common resolution to send in order to send a strong signal to the authorities about the urgency to end impunity against journalists. One of the participants dare to challenge member states: “When do we start to bring those who instigated the crimes against journalists to court?” We must raise our voice on the question concerning the freedom of journalists. It is important that we spoke out for those journalists who are silenced or put in jails for doing their jobs.

This is especially the case in Turkey which is the European country with the highest numbers of journalist in jails. Some 100 journalists have been imprisoned since we met in Verviers more than a year ago. But since then we see hopes in our efforts to campaign for their freedom. Together with other civil society organizations our project in Turkey has successfully led to the release of several jailed journalists and among them, some were given life sentences. But 23 journalists are still in jails. Together with our affiliate in Turkey, we are working hard to campaign for their freedom and to build a strong union in Turkey.

In beginning of October, I went to Macedonia and visited a highly respected investigative journalist Tomislav Kezarovski who was sentenced to 4½ year in jail for doing his job. After having spent one year in an 8-sq meter cell together with three other prisoners, he has been under home arrest for six months. Now, all he can do is to waiting for the verdict of the appeal court. We hope for freedom, but the fear of being sent back to the prison is overwhelming.

In cooperation with NGO’s, lawyers and European institutions, we have gather efforts to send a strong message to the Macedonian authorities that putting Tomislav in jail is against Europe’s democracy to protect freedom of express and their wish for integration in Europe. Azerbaijan is another country where jailing journalists have become a common practice – we have to put pressure on all our governments, the EU and the Council of Europe to reserve this dangerous trend.

Institutions like the EU the Council of Europe, the OSCE and UNESCO have their roles in safeguarding media freedom. The EFJ also has a duty as a European organization to ensure that press freedom, safety of journalists and media pluralism as the fundamental pillars in the development of democracy.

In South Eastern Europe, we witnessed trade union leaders being removed from their jobs as journalists because of role as trade union leaders. It has happened in Turkey, Macedonia, Montenegro and many countries in the region. Throughout history, it is evident that this is a well-known tactic to weaken our unions and leaders. This is a topic we must address in the coming years. A democratic Europe should not accept such a development.

Against this background, we are glad that the EFJ has secured a two-year programme with funding to develop further this area of work, to build strong unions, strengthen journalists' rights, including the right to organize and collective bargaining for all journalists.

The labor rights in Europe are changing, and the cross border media landscape is developing rapidly. Today we have a Europe with very different working conditions from country to country, different legislation and different wishes to make labor rights standard fair and equal for all.

As a collective body, the EFJ will act in accordance to the needs of our affiliates – providing support and sharing solidarity. We should use all our efforts to follow and lobby laws whether in Brussels or Strasbourg that is favour for journalists and their unions. As a European organization, we are the voice representing of journalists and their unions in front of MEPs, commissioners and officials within the European Commission and the Parliament.

To do that we prepared an EFJ Manifesto for the European election and more than 200 candidates, among them over 50 were elected, gave us their support. This has sent a significant signal about our presence. But this is the only the first step. Now we must follow our momentum to campaign for these issues in the manifesto, and we will do so.

One of the main topics in the Manifesto is the rights of our freelancers. We are talking about collective agreements, authors' rights and unfair contracts. These challenges for freelancers were on the agenda, when I met with the former French commissioner, Michel Barnier last July. He confirmed that the conditions or the issues on freelancers are on the EU agenda. We will make sure that the new Commissioner will continue working on this issue.

At the same meeting, I put pressure on the need of respecting the licensing models in the new directive for collecting management societies concerning secondary use of authors' rights protected materials. With a broad European cooperation including our affiliates and all creative organizations, we eliminated the worst scenarios from that directive.

Talking about authors' rights, we are in a battlefield where very strong stakeholders try to keep us away – but we stay and we will stay and fight for our members' rights. The environment of the creative culture contributes significantly to the European economy and authors' rights are key to ensure that. This is the message we have to spread among our politicians back home.

In May this year together with the chair of AREG we had a meeting with the General Director of World Intellectual Property Organization, and he rightly agreed with our views. I think it is time to win the attention from the civil society and from the biggest stakeholders like Google, Apple, Amazon, Facebook, and Disney etc. We need a dialogue with both of these stakeholders and key representatives from the civil society. Authors' rights are fundamental for both credibility and pluralism in journalism.

Austerity was one of the most debated topics at our last general meeting. In Vienna this year we have arranged a seminar about how to deal with the severe situation on the job market for many of our members.

As I see it we have to move our focus to concentrate our energy more on the job growth and less on job losses. To confront austerity we must provide our affiliates with new ideas, the spirit of

cooperation, news skills and enthusiasm to find new possibilities. The old days will never come back; the media landscape has changed forever and will continue changing. The EFJ should be in forefront of this development.

We must encourage our affiliates to recruit and organize new members in the new fields and seek influence on that development.

We must also help our affiliates to find ways to equip freelancers with new skills in journalism and business who can then create new jobs for more journalists.

Beside the overall view of the development in Europe with new possibilities, it is more important than ever to highlight the EU Fundamental Rights Act about the right to organize and the right to collective bargaining.

Another European agenda is to create and maintain a sustainable pluralistic media landscape. It was mentioned in the report from the so called High Level Group set up by commissioner Neelie Kroes and with some 30 recommendations among which we highly welcomed the support for strong and independent public service broadcasting, pluralism in the media, self-regulatory policy and safety.

During the last 18 months I have met with Neelie Kroes twice to underline the need of political support of press freedom, pluralism and self-regulation on media issues. And we will in the EFJ continue that part of our work.

Public service broadcasting has been attacked from both the governments and the private media in a way which has created a serious threat. Let me just mention the situation in Greece with the close down of the public service broadcaster which was then replaced by a new but much smaller and weaker public broadcaster. In Poland where the core journalistic activities have been outsourced because no one, even some ministers, cares about paying their license fee. In the EFJ we are in contact with the European Broadcasting Union about this, and I have discussed it with both the director and president of the EBU.

The past experience has proved that the cooperation with other European and international organisations and institutions is key make a difference and make our voice heard louder. The past year has seen such cooperoation expanding and it will continue to expand in the coming years.

On the other hand it is extremely important to strengthen our talks with our affiliates in all parts of Europe. Without the knowledge of yours, including your needs, support and expertise, we won't be able to make a difference with a significant impact.

More importantly, we must constantly remind ourselves that we need to work together with respect and solidarity despite the cultural, historical and legislative differences in our countries. The Annual Meeting has proven to be an opportunity to test these qualities among us – respecting each other's differences and working in solidarity. Together, we should use try every efforts in working towards a common solution rather deepening the conflict. We are stronger together and our solidarity can win over our differences and disagreements. I wish us all a fruitful annual meeting, for both affiliates who are present here and those who are not able to come for whatever reason that may be.