

To: Věra Jourová, Vice-President for Values and Transparency  
To: Thierry Breton, Commissioner for Internal Market

22 June 2023

## **Open letter to the European Commission: e-influence mercenaries operating in the EU undermine access to information**

Dear Commissioners,

The undersigned civil society, media and journalists' organisations are writing to denounce the abusive practices of some reputation management companies operating in Europe, which are misusing European laws or intimidating journalists to stifle criticism and pursue shady activities in secret.

With this letter, the undersigned organisations wish to alert the European Commission to the increasing abuses of EU privacy laws and in particular the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the risk they pose to the freedom of information in Europe.

Last February, the media NGO Forbidden Stories - which continues the work of assassinated journalists - published its latest investigation into disinformation mercenaries, "[Story Killers](#)", in cooperation with the Washington Post, The Guardian, El Pais, the Organised Crime and Corruption Project (OCCRP), the Investigative Reporting Project Italy (IRPIMedia), and others. Leaked documents revealed the practices of one player in particular: [Eliminalia](#), a Spanish reputation management company that offers to clean up clients' reputation on the internet for a few thousand euros.<sup>1</sup>

Web reputation agencies were described as "[a murky business](#)" by the Financial Times in 2021 and Eliminalia is no exception. Based in Barcelona, it has exploited EU privacy regulations (as well as DMCA copyright regulations in the US) for the past decade to deindex or delete negative content about their clients. Many of Eliminalia's tactics are designed to intimidate journalists and media outlets into taking down their stories. According to the OCCRP, along with flooding the internet with altered stories and fake news favourable to their clients, Eliminalia has posed as EU officials, impersonated media outlets, filed illegitimate GDPR and DMCA takedown notices, and copied content from the legitimate news media.

Thanks to a leak of customer files, investigative reporters were able to [establish](#) that these services are commonly sought out by individuals accused of or convicted of serious crimes. Behind the veneer of a legitimate business that protects its clients' "right to be forgotten",

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<sup>1</sup> In December 2022, Eliminalia changed its name to iData Protection S.L.

companies like Eliminalia abuse EU privacy regulations and deploy unethical tactics to provide reputation laundering services and remove information in the public interest.

In France, another company with similar activities [caught our attention](#). Three media outlets (Mediapart, [Arrêt sur images](#) and [Reflets](#)) were prosecuted for defamation in 2022 by [Avisa Partners](#), a French company specialising in “economic intelligence, global advocacy and cybersecurity”. The lawsuits are a response to investigations published last year which revealed that Avisa Partners' activities included lobbying, e-influence and disinformation, serving, among others, large companies and authoritarian states' interests. Avisa Partners has also served [formal notice](#) on three other French media outlets, Next Impact, l'ADN and Miroir du Nord, to remove certain references in journalistic investigations of the group's activities. Mediapart reported that the same company also [gathered intelligence](#) - including personal activities, home addresses, relationships and sources of income - on Bulgarian investigative journalist Atanas Tchobanov. The report was commissioned on behalf of an unnamed client and for unknown purposes.

On June 1, the French media “[L'Informé](#)” reported that Avisa Partners - also recently rebranded as ‘Forward’ - had been awarded a contract by the European Commission to promote the EU's diplomatic strategy. We take a dim view of the proximity of such a company to a European institution that is also committed to defending public interest reporting, journalists and media freedom.

These events taking place within the European Union are of particular concern to our organisations, considering the current discussions on the European Media Freedom Act, the protection of public watchdogs from strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), as well as the increasing misuse of European laws as a justification for preventing the publication of public interest information.

We look forward to starting a dialogue and welcome any opportunity for further discussion.

Yours sincerely,

**Signed:**

European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)  
Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP)  
Investigative Reporting Project Italy (IRPI)  
International Press Institute (IPI)  
Context Investigative Reporting Project Romania  
“Investigative Journalists” (Hetq) Armenia  
Belarusian Investigative Center (BIC)  
Investigace.cz; Czech Republic  
OBC Transeuropa (OBCT)  
Media Guard Association, Moldova

Blueprint for Free Speech e.V., Germany  
RISE Moldova, Moldova  
South East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO)  
Investigative Center of Jan Kuciak (ICJK), Slovakia  
Croatian Journalists' Association (HND)  
The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation  
Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD)  
Transparency International EU