ASSEMBLÉE PARLEMENTAIRE
DU CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Recommendation 1950 (2011)[1]
Final version

The protection of journalists' sources

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly recalls that the free exercise of journalism is enshrined in the right to freedom of expression and information, which is guaranteed by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights ("the Convention", ETS No. 5). This right constitutes the foundation of a democratic society and an indispensable requirement for its progress and the development of every individual. Free, independent and pluralist media are a necessary condition of any true democratic society. Democracy and good governance require accountability and transparency and, in this respect, media play an essential role in the public's scrutiny of public and private sectors in society.

2. Recalling Committee of Ministers Recommendation No. R (2000) 7 on the right of journalists not to disclose their sources of information, the Assembly reaffirms that the protection of journalists' sources of information is a basic condition for both the full exercise of journalistic work and the right of the public to be informed on matters of public concern, as expressed by the European Court of Human Rights in its case law under Article 10 of the Convention.

3. The Assembly notes with concern the large number of cases in which public authorities in Europe have forced, or attempted to force, journalists to disclose their sources, despite the clear standards set by the European Court of Human Rights and the Committee of Ministers. These violations are more frequent in member states without clear legislation. In cases of investigative journalism, the protection of sources is of even greater importance, as stated in the Committee of Ministers' Declaration of 26 September 2007 on the protection and promotion of investigative journalism.

4. Referring to the new Press and Media Law of Hungary (Law CIV of 2010 on the freedom of the press and the fundamental rules on media content), the Assembly expresses its concern that limits to the exercise of media freedom fixed by Article 4.3 and the exceptions to the right of journalists not to disclose their sources stipulated in Article 6 of this law seem to be overly broad and thus may have a severe chilling effect on media freedom. This law sets forth neither the procedural conditions concerning disclosures nor guarantees for journalists requested to disclose their sources. The Assembly calls on the Government and Parliament of Hungary to amend this law, ensuring that its implementation cannot hinder the right recognised by Article 10 of the Convention.

5. Public authorities must not demand the disclosure of information identifying a source unless the requirements of Article 10, paragraph 2, of the Convention are met and unless it can be convincingly established that reasonable alternative measures to disclosure do not exist or have been exhausted, the legitimate interest in the disclosure clearly outweighs the public interest in the non-disclosure, and an overriding requirement of the need for disclosure is proved.

6. The disclosure of information identifying a source should therefore be limited to exceptional circumstances where vital public or individual interests are at stake and can be convincingly established. The competent authorities, requesting exceptionally the disclosure of a source, must specify the reasons why such vital interest outweighs the interest in the non-disclosure and whether alternative measures have been exhausted, such as other evidence. If sources are protected against any disclosure under national law, their disclosure must not be requested.

7. Recalling Recommendation Rec(2003)13 of the Committee of Ministers on the provision of information through the media in relation to criminal proceedings, the Assembly reaffirms that the public must be able to receive information through the media about the activities of police services and judicial authorities, including court proceedings of public interest, as far as this does not prejudice the presumption of innocence of the suspect or accused under Article 6 of the Convention, the right to privacy under Article 8 of the Convention or the secrecy of investigations and police inquiries.

8. The right of journalists not to disclose their sources applies also to sources from within the police or judicial authorities. Where such provision of information to journalists was illegal, police and judicial authorities must pursue internal investigations instead of asking journalists to disclose their sources.

9. In so far as Article 10 of the Convention protects the right of the public to be informed on matters of public concern, anyone who has knowledge or information about such matters should be able to either post it confidentially on third-party media, including Internet networks, or submit it confidentially to journalists.

10. With regard to the right of every person to disclose confidentially to the media, or by other means, information about unlawful acts and other wrongdoings of public concern, the Assembly recalls its Resolution 1729 (2010) and Recommendation 1916 (2010) on the protection of "whistle-blowers" and reaffirms that member states should review legislation in this respect to ensure consistency of domestic rules with the European standards enshrined in these texts.

1. Assembly debate on 25 January 2011 (4th Sitting) (see Doc. 12443, report of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education, rapporteur: Mr Johansson). Text adopted by the Assembly on 25 January 2011 (4th Sitting).

11. In the same manner as the media landscape has changed through technological convergence, the professional profile of journalists has changed over the last decade. Modern media rely increasingly on mobile and Internet-based communication services. They use information and images originating from non-journalists to a larger extent. Non-journalists also publish their own or third-party information and images on their own or third-party Internet media, accessible to a wide and often undefined audience. Under these circumstances, it is necessary to clarify the application of the right of journalists not to disclose their sources of information.

12. The Assembly reaffirms that the confidentiality of journalists' sources must not be compromised by the increasing technological possibilities for public authorities to control the use by journalists of mobile telecommunication and Internet media. The interception of correspondence, surveillance of journalists or search and seizure of information must not circumvent the protection of journalists' sources. Internet service providers and telecommunication companies should not be obliged to disclose information which may lead to the identification of journalists' sources in violation of Article 10 of the Convention.

13. Referring to the European Union's Directive 2006/24/EC of 15 March 2006 on the retention of data generated or processed in connection with the provision of publicly available electronic communications services or of public communications networks, the Assembly insists on the need to ensure that legal provisions enacted by member states when transposing this directive are consistent with the right of journalists not to disclose their sources under Article 10 of the Convention and with the right to privacy under Article 8 of the Convention. The Assembly also stresses the importance of ensuring coherence of domestic legislation with Articles 16 and 17 of the Convention on Cybercrime ("the Budapest Convention", ETS No. 185).

14. The Assembly welcomes the fact that journalists have expressed in professional codes of conduct their obligation not to disclose their sources of information when they receive information confidentially. This professional ethical standard ensures that sources may rely on confidentiality and decide to provide journalists with information which may be of public concern. The Assembly invites journalists and their organisations to ensure, through self-regulation, that sources are not disclosed.

15. The right of journalists not to disclose their sources of information is a professional privilege, intended to encourage sources to provide journalists with important information which they would not give without a commitment to confidentiality. The same relationship of trust does not exist with regard to non-journalists, such as individuals with their own website or web blog. Therefore, non-journalists cannot benefit from the right of journalists not to reveal their sources.

16. The Assembly welcomes the work on media freedom of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights and asks the Commissioner to pay particular attention, when visiting member states and meeting media ombudspersons, to the protection of the confidentiality of journalists' sources.

17. The Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers:

17.1. call on those member states which do not have legislation specifying the right of journalists not to disclose their sources of information, to pass such legislation in accordance with the case law of the European Court of Human Rights and Committee of Ministers Recommendation No. R (2000) 7;

17.2. assist member states in analysing and improving their legislation on the protection of the confidentiality of journalists' sources, in particular by supporting the review of their national laws on surveillance, anti-terrorism, data retention and access to telecommunications records;

17.3. ask its competent steering committee to draw up, in co-operation with journalists' and media freedom organisations, guidelines for prosecutors and the police, as well as training material for judges, on the right of journalists not to disclose their sources of information, in accordance with Committee of Ministers Recommendations Nos. R (2000) 7 and Rec(2003)13 and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights;

17.4. ask its competent steering committee to draw up guidelines for public authorities and private service providers concerning the protection of the confidentiality of journalists' sources in the context of the interception or disclosure of computer data and traffic data of computer networks in accordance with Articles 16 and 17 of the Convention on Cybercrime and Articles 8 and 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.