



Fostering the Power of Our Voices: Free Expression in Europe and Central Asia

Annual Report 2021

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THE WORLD WE KNOW AT THE EDGE

As we reflect on the events of 2021, Russia has launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, shelling cities, killing civilians, and destroying cultural heritage. While soldiers fight on the battlefield, there is a parallel battle over the narrative. The Kremlin's regime intensifies its efforts to denigrate Ukrainians and justify appalling violations of international law. Meanwhile, journalists risk their lives to provide us with accurate information about the grim realities of the war.

While societies courageously persevere through socio-political upheavals and face daily hardships, governments have often been tempted to exploit armed conflict, unrest, or the global pandemic as a pretext to undermine freedom of expression and restrict fundamental rights, citing national security. In addition, new challenges are emerging, prompting timely conversations on how to redefine freedom of expression in an increasingly digital age.

ARTICLE 19 Europe joins the International Office in launching a new four-year strategy, **The Power of Our Voices (2022–25)**. This strategy aims to guide us through the rapidly changing landscape of free expression, enabling us to stay agile and prepared to address emerging threats while also seizing opportunities for progress and driving meaningful change. Over the next four years, we will direct our efforts to achieve three main goals:

- Ensuring digital spaces, governance, services, and technologies are built on human rights principles, fostering the diversity of human experience;
- Cultivating communities that are more inclusive, protected, and resilient, where individuals feel free to express themselves across public and media spaces;
- Promoting public access to accurate, reliable information and data to empower individuals in claiming their rights.

We invite our partners and supporters to join this journey and build resilient systems that protect those who speak out, challenge power, and strive for change. Together, we can strengthen the global movement for free expression, creating local and global impacts so that all people may fully harness **the power of their voices**.

A NEW DIGITAL ERA FOR FREE EXPRESSION

Reclaim your face

In 2021, ARTICLE 19 Europe, in collaboration with the Law and Policy team from our International Office, played an active role in coalitions campaigning against [biometric mass surveillance](#) in the EU. Our organisation is a member of Reclaim Your Face, a coalition of civil society organisations established to call on the European Commission to [ban biometric mass surveillance](#) in public spaces. The campaign reached several important milestones throughout the year, including:

- Inspiring nearly 65,000 EU citizens to support our European Citizens Initiative;
- Setting the agenda of the artificial intelligence debate, including the [AI Act law proposal](#);
- Gathering the support of key stakeholders, including Members of the European Parliament the EU's top data-protection regulators, several national data- protection authorities, and UN officials.

Our team looks forward to continuing to work with Reclaim Your Face in 2022, expanding our impact and reaching a new level of political engagement.

Spotlight on DMA and DSA

Throughout 2021, the ARTICLE 19 Europe office actively advocated to shape the EU's Digital Markets Act ([DMA](#)) and Digital Services Act ([DSA](#)). Leveraging our new policies, we focused on protecting users' rights to freedom of expression, promoting interoperability, and redistributing power within social media markets to dismantle the monopoly of a few companies over communication infrastructure.

We engaged with the EU policymakers, civil society organisations, journalists, digital rights activists, and the public to foster debate and share knowledge supporting a [diverse, decentralised](#) online environment. Our work emphasised end-user protections from [exploitative corporate practices](#) (including oversight of the algorithms) and advocated for [interoperability obligations for core platforms](#). Our legal experts contributed to numerous op-eds to raise awareness of our innovative, human-rights-based solutions.

Our Law and Policy team is now developing legal guides, case studies, and capacity-building resources to amplify our recommendations, focusing on protecting freedom of expression online.

Addressing disinformation online

ARTICLE 19 Europe supported our Law and Policy team from the International Office in [providing feedback to the European Commission's consultation on the Guidance on tackling disinformation](#), emphasising that any updates to the Code of Practice on Disinformation must align with international human rights standards. We raised concerns that the Code's current definition of disinformation is overly broad, risking the undermining of freedom of expression. To strengthen accountability, we called for increased transparency in reporting practices and algorithmic operations and stressed the need to address companies' business models to achieve these aims. In our submission, we underscored the necessity of embedding freedom of expression as a core principle of the Code, noting that without it, restrictions on 'disinformation' may infringe upon freedom of expression standards.

Online censorship

In 2021 we observed a troubling trend across several countries in the region, with authorities increasingly attempting to interfere with online free expression by adopting harsh laws and pressuring tech companies to yield to political demands to remove dissenting content.

Prior to the parliamentary elections in Russia, [Apple and Google removed](#) the popular Navalny app from their online store following the request from the authorities. In Turkey, YouTube and [TikTok](#) announced their compliance with a new repressive social media law requiring them to establish local entities and government focal points, increasing political control over their operations

In Turkey, [ARTICLE 19 Europe submitted](#) comments to the Facebook Oversight Board on the removal of an Instagram post featuring Abdullah Öcalan, PKK co-founder, which Facebook deemed a violation of its **Dangerous Individuals and Organizations Standards**. We argued that these standards should permit public debate on national security and highlighted issues with Facebook's policy, referencing international standards on incitement to terrorism.

In February 2021, ARTICLE 19 Europe [submitted a third-party intervention](#) to the European Court of Human Rights in **Yaman Akdeniz and Kerem Altıparmak v. Turkey**, a case challenging the blocking of news websites and social media in Turkey. The case examines whether Internet users can claim victim status when deprived of access to online information. We addressed media plurality and how website blocking can prevent the documentation of human rights abuses. We stressed that any restriction on the grounds of national security must be necessary and proportionate.

We have repeatedly urged tech companies to review their in-country operational policies, especially around pivotal events such as elections and adoption of new restrictive laws. Companies, as in [YouTube's case of removing Navalny's videos in Russia](#), must be transparent about their decision-making processes and content moderation tools. They should also challenge blocking and removal orders from authorities to avoid causing, contributing to, or becoming complicit in human rights abuses.

Right to be forgotten

In February 2021, ARTICLE 19 Europe and Media Defence submitted [a third-party intervention](#) to the European Court of Human Rights on 'the right to be forgotten'. The case, **Biancardi v. Italy**, involves an online newspaper ordered to remove a 2008 article about a stabbing incident, with the editor fined €10,000 for reputational damages – a decision upheld by Italy's Supreme Court. The intervention argues that States must carefully balance privacy rights with freedom of expression and warns that expanding the 'right to be forgotten' could seriously impact press freedom and public access to information.

MORE RESILIENT, PROTECTED AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

Crackdown on civil society in Belarus

The aftermath of Belarus's 2020 presidential election saw a courageous surge of pro-democracy protests, as citizens united to oppose the fraudulent re-election of President Alyaksandr Lukashenko. The regime's response was a brutal and systematic crackdown, targeting protesters, independent media, [journalists](#) and [civil society](#) groups. What began as a hopeful movement for change turned into an era of heightened repression and authoritarian control, with freedoms curtailed both online and offline.

Women played a pivotal role in the opposition, stepping into leadership when male candidates were arrested or barred from running. Non-violent, women-led protests, often held weekly, symbolised resilience and solidarity. Yet, they were met with alarming violence: thousands of protesters faced arbitrary detention, torture, and inhumane treatment, including beatings, electric shocks, and sexual violence. Despite Lukashenko's dubious claim of an 80% electoral victory – widely denounced as rigged – protests continued, matched only by the regime's intensifying crackdown.

Among those swept up in this repression were [Andrei Aliaksandrau, a former ARTICLE 19 staff member, and his partner, Irina Zlobina](#). Arrested in January 2021 in Minsk, they remain in pre-trial detention under bogus charges. Andrei, a staunch advocate for human rights, is accused of 'treason to the state' for allegedly paying fines for detained protesters and journalists – a charge carrying up to 15 years in prison. Irina faces up to three years for allegedly 'organising actions grossly violating public order'. ARTICLE 19 Europe continues to demand their immediate and unconditional release, highlighting Andrei's dedication to defending freedom of expression. In collaboration with Index on Censorship, we launched [a solidarity campaign](#) marking the anniversary of their detention, urging the international community to stand with Andrei and Irina, and all those silenced in Belarus.

ARTICLE 19 Europe extends solidarity with the people of Belarus in their pursuit of justice and freedom. We call for the unconditional release of all [political prisoners](#) and demand humane treatment for those still incarcerated. In 2021, we published [a legal analysis](#) examining restrictive legislation and held a meeting with [opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya](#). Through [public events](#) and international forums, including [the UN Human Rights Council](#) we sought to raise awareness of the plight of Belarusians to ensure it received international attention.

Challenging laws targeting free expression

Several governments across the region attempted to curtail freedom of expression, both online and offline, by proposing and, in some cases, enacting restrictive laws under the guise of combating disinformation or hate speech. Others continued to ignore civil societies' calls to repeal criminal defamation provisions which enable the repeated harassment of public watchdogs by the wealthy and powerful. ARTICLE 19 remained at the forefront of efforts to support resilient civil society and to challenge these harmful legal measures, developing legal analyses of the problematic laws and providing recommendations to amend legislation in line with international freedom of expression standards.

We analysed [a series of draft laws impeding freedom of expression in France](#) including the Global Security Bill, the dissolution of certain collectives and non-governmental organisations, as well as the Bill to strengthen 'respect for republican principles'. We outlined recommendations for the next steps on how to safeguard fundamental rights.

In Italy, we continued to advocate for a comprehensive reform of the defamation law including [decriminalisation of defamation](#) to hinder growing attempts to harass journalists and activists with [SLAPPs](#). At the same time, we continued to advocate for [protection of the journalistic sources](#). In addition, ARTICLE 19 Europe [submitted an expert contribution](#) to the Italian Senate on 'Zan Bill' that would amend the Penal Code provisions on incitement. The submission analyses the compliance of key provisions of the Bill with international freedom of expression standards on 'hate speech' and provides some key recommendations for legislators and enforcers.

Kyrgyzstan's parliamentary elections on 4 October 2020 and their aftermath underscored the urgent need to safeguard freedom of expression, access to information, and media freedom. ARTICLE 19 Europe prepared [a legal briefing](#) examining key challenges to freedom of expression in the country, including hate speech, misinformation, disinformation, and restrictions on media and online expression in the electoral context. Our recommendations aim to contribute to public debate and support future reforms to strengthen these fundamental rights. We also developed two legal briefings examining key elements of legislative restrictions on freedom of expression, purportedly designed to address 'extremism', and their implementation in practice, both in [Kyrgyzstan](#) and [Kazakhstan](#).

In Turkey, we strongly opposed the government's plans to introduce [a new regulation](#) of so-called fake news and 'foreign-funded' news in the country which represents a blatant attack against independent media and journalists receiving financial support from abroad.

Supporting journalists and human rights defenders

In 2021, we observed a sharp decline in the protection of freedom of expression and an escalating erosion of media freedom in Turkey. This included open attacks on journalists and activists, the weaponisation of disinformation and terrorism laws, and tighter control over big tech to regulate online content and fuel censorship. In response, ARTICLE 19 Europe intensified its efforts to support civil society in Turkey through training, legal expertise, international advocacy, and awareness-raising campaigns. Given the growing concerns about fundamental rights and the rule of law, ARTICLE 19 Europe [joined an open letter](#) urging the Presidents of the European Council and the European Commission to prioritise human rights challenges during their visit to Turkey.

Together with The Bar Human Rights Committee of England and Wales, we [held four free remote training sessions](#) in the effective use and practice of international human rights law and mechanisms to reinforce protections for refugee and migrant populations in Turkey.

ARTICLE 19 Europe in strong collaboration with our Law and Policy team from the international office intervened in several crucial cases for protection of public watchdogs and freedom of expression. We were encouraged to see that in some instances the courts including the European Court of Human Rights openly followed our arguments in explanations of judgements. These vital cases include [Akin and 42 other applications v. Turkey](#) (academic freedom), [Üçdağ v. Turkey](#) (free expression in national security), Kurdish opposition politician [Selahattin Demirtaş](#) or journalist [Buse Söğütü](#) charged under several terrorism-related offences.

In 2021, we welcomed [the release of Turkish novelist Ahmet Altan](#). ARTICLE 19 Europe has campaigned on his case since his initial arrest in September 2016, submitting [an expert opinion](#) during the first trial and joining other organisations in [intervening](#) in the European Court of Human Rights case. We also monitored both the trial and retrial, where Altan received lengthy prison sentences despite the absence of concrete or individualised evidence of his involvement in any crime. His case has become emblematic of the systematic judicial harassment aimed at silencing critical voices in Turkey.

Zooming out to the broader region, we publicly supported several journalists and activists who faced campaigns of intimidation, legal harassment, and other threats because of their vital work. These included the detention of lawyer and campaigner [Ivan Pavlov](#) in Russia alongside increased attacks against opposition, media and [civil society organisations](#) in the country, an arrest warrant issued against British journalist [Clare Rewcastle Brown](#), a legal case against Polish reporter [Katarzyna Włodkowska](#), the criminal defamation conviction of Polish journalist [Ewa Siedlecka](#), and an arson attack against Serbian journalist [Milan Jovanovic](#).

At the EU level, we called for an immediate investigation into the alleged use of [spyware against journalists by Hungarian authorities](#) and contributed to recommendations on improving the reporting process for [the rule of law reports](#).

Standing up to legal harassment

In 2021, SLAPPs – strategic lawsuits against public participation – continued to rise across Europe aiming to intimidate and financially drain critics, thereby silencing dissent. On 16 September, the European Commission pledged to introduce EU-wide anti-SLAPP measures, a major step forward long advocated by ARTICLE 19 Europe. In partnership with the Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe ([CASE](#)), on whose steering committee ARTICLE 19 Europe sits, we pushed for EU action and addressed SLAPP cases in [Greece](#), Poland, Serbia, Spain, and the UK. We published [a report on Spain](#) and are developing similar studies for [Serbia](#), as well as a comprehensive study on abusive litigation across Europe. ARTICLE 19 Europe also [monitored](#) trials in Poland and reported threats to journalists via the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) and the Safety of Journalists Platform coordinated by the Council of Europe. We supported the acquittal of [Professor Wojciech Sadurski](#), a long-standing SLAPP defendant and monitored a SLAPP case against investigative journalist [Grzegorz Rzechowski](#) who has been intimidated due to his reporting on Russian influence in Poland. The rise of SLAPPs underscores the urgent need for an EU Anti-SLAPP Directive, and ARTICLE 19 Europe continues to contribute to its development within the EU Expert Group against SLAPPs.

Media freedom and pluralism

As part of the Media Freedom Rapid Response ([MFRR](#)) mechanism and the Council of Europe's Platform on [Safety of Journalists](#), ARTICLE 19 Europe continued to monitor and react to threats against journalists and to address legislative proposals aimed at weakening media freedom, pluralism and independence of the outlets in the region.

ARTICLE 19 Europe co-authored an annual report of the Council of Europe's Platform to Promote the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists '[Wanted! Real action for media freedom in Europe](#)' which found that more than 200 serious violations of media freedom were recorded in Europe in the previous year. We addressed Member States at the Committee of Ministers on the report's recommendations for strengthening media freedom in Europe.

As part of the MFRR, we joined press freedom missions in [Serbia](#), [Slovenia](#) and [Turkey](#), which confirmed the alarming trend of shrinking space for independent media in these countries. The missions were followed by comprehensive reports outlining key challenges and recommendations.

We also raised concerns about the establishment of a new Media and Information Agency in [Albania](#) that is strictly dependent on the government, a dangerous criminal amendment on 'false news' in [Greece](#), trolling and harassment of independent media in [Kyrgyzstan](#), and the ongoing harassment of the media including [RFE/RL](#) in [Russia](#) through foreign agent laws.

Poland: Challenging power concentration on media market

ARTICLE 19 Europe raised concerns that inadequate market regulations, both online and offline, threatens media diversity and freedom of speech.

It was announced in December 2020 that PKN Orlen, a state-controlled oil company, would acquire Polska Press Group, an independent media group with 17 million readers and a majority of local newspapers. In March 2021, the Polish Human Rights Ombudsman appealed this acquisition, prompting the Warsaw Regional Court to suspend the merger pending review. ARTICLE 19 Europe [submitted an amicus brief](#) supporting the Ombudsman, arguing the acquisition would breach EU and Polish merger rules and undermine media pluralism.

Similarly, we sent [an open letter to President Andrzej Duda](#) urging him to veto ‘Lex TVN’ – a bill designed to push out foreign owners, which would allow government-aligned entities to potentially take control of TVN, Poland’s largest private broadcaster. This takeover could ultimately lead to a shift in its editorial stance.

We participated in expert discussions on the erosion of media freedom in Poland at [international conferences](#) and during sessions of [the UN Human Rights Council](#).

Right to protest

In 2020, the UN Human Rights Committee adopted a General Comment on the right to protest, noting that a ‘failure to respect and ensure the right of peaceful assembly is typically a marker of repression’. ARTICLE 19 Europe asserts that exercising the right to protest is [a fundamental right](#) and part of public order, not an inherent threat to it – even when protests cause inconvenience or disruption.

In this spirit, we conducted rigorous human rights research on protest in Poland. We investigated both the overall state of the right to protest and how violations of this right affect the most at-risk group. The collected evidence will inform a new global campaign on the right to protest, launching in 2022.

In 2021, we submitted [an expert opinion](#) in the case of the **Saturday Mothers/People** in Turkey, where defendants faced up to three years in prison for participating in a peaceful protest. In our submission, we reiterated that peaceful demonstrations should not be met with criminal sanctions and that any restrictions on the right to peaceful assembly must not be so severe as to create a ‘chilling effect’ on protest.

Against hate speech and disinformation

#ChallengeHate

In 2021, ARTICLE 19 Europe launched [#ChallengeHate](#) in Kyrgyzstan, a campaign aimed at educating and empowering people to address ‘hate speech’ while defending freedom of expression. Chosen due to rising ‘hate speech’ around recent elections, the campaign explores key questions on understanding, challenging, and legally addressing ‘hate speech’. Using cartoons, videos, and quizzes in Kyrgyz and Russian, **#ChallengeHate** encourages critical thinking and advocacy for better laws and policies. As part of the EU-funded Media Dialogue project, led by the European Partnership for Democracy, this initiative involves a consortium of five organisations, including ARTICLE 19 Europe.

#KeepItReal

The [#KeepItReal](#) campaign was launched to engage young people in Ireland in meaningful conversations about disinformation and social media, ensuring their voices are included in debates on ‘fake news’ and social media policies. Our inspiring ambassadors led discussions on how to counter disinformation online and explored actions that key stakeholders in Ireland – media, politicians, and civil society – can take to tackle this growing threat.

We hosted [a three-day online Hate Speech Conference](#) bringing together youth from Kyrgyzstan and Ireland to discuss their experiences of ‘hate speech’ and ‘disinformation’ – and how to challenge it. Young people who have engaged in our [#ChallengeHate](#) and [#KeepItReal](#) campaigns came together to exchange knowledge and good practices as well as address doubts and seek support.

Fighting impunity

Impunity for the killings of journalists undermines the rule of law and threatens press freedom. ARTICLE 19 Europe reaffirms its commitment to [advocating for full justice](#) for the brave and inspiring reporters, including [Daphne Caruana Galizia](#), [Giorgos Karaivaz](#), [Peter de Vries](#) or [Tahir Elçi](#) who were assassinated for their courageous work in the public interest.

In July 2021, [a Public Inquiry](#) found the Maltese State responsible for the assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia who was killed in a car bomb attack in 2017, citing a collapse in the rule of law. ARTICLE 19 Europe played a vital role in demanding accountability through advocacy, including monitoring inquiry proceedings and submitting reports on press freedom threats. In October 2021, ARTICLE 19 Europe [joined a mission to Malta](#), engaging with government officials, including Prime Minister Robert Abela, to press for justice and reforms to ensure journalist safety. We remain committed to seeking full accountability and implementing the inquiry’s recommendations.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Together with the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD), we [submitted a response](#) to the EU public consultation on an initiative for greater transparency in sponsored political content. We highlighted the need for transparency in political advertising, both online and offline, to ensure EU citizens have free access to accurate information.

The state of emergency declared by Polish authorities along the border with Belarus severely restricted access for journalists and activists seeking to monitor, report on, and provide support during the unfolding humanitarian crisis. We urged the authorities to respect and facilitate [the free flow of information](#) as well as to refrain from arbitrary

To support our partners on the ground campaigning for the right to know, we strongly opposed proposed restrictions on [access to information laws](#) in Poland. Such measures would inevitably undermine public transparency and prevent media outlets from fulfilling their crucial watchdog role.

