The Right to Freedom of Expression and Information under the European Human Rights System: Towards a more Transparent Democratic Society

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Abstract

Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights has become a crucial instrument to stimulate and compel the national authorities of the 47 member states not only to abstain from interferences restricting media freedom and investigative journalism, but also to promote transparency, media pluralism and internet freedom. This paper explores some of the characteristics and developments of the European Court’s case law regarding media, journalism, internet freedom, newsgathering, whistleblowing and access to information. The perspective of the analysis is that effectively guaranteeing the right to freedom of expression and information helps develop the quality of democracy, the protection of other human rights and ultimately contributes to achieve a more sustainable, and hence a better, world to live in.

Keywords

Participation in public debate, investigative journalism, media and internet freedom, access to information, whistleblowing

II. Freedom of Expression and the European Court of Human Rights

Article 10 of the European Convention reads as follows:

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authorities and regardless of frontiers. This Article shall not prevent States from requiring the disclosure of information in respect of criminal proceedings or of official documents the publication of which is not in the public interest. The freedom to hold opinions and to express them orally, in writing or in any other manner does not entail an unconditional right to receive any information or material: States may take reasonable measures, not exceeding the prescribed limits, to protect society from the publication of information which they consider to be particularly harmful to their public life. Freedom of expression is subject to such restrictions as are provided for by law in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity and public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the prevention of the publication of the proceedings of courts or other information likely to interfere with the effective conduct of justice, or for the protection of the rights or reputations of others, provided that the corresponding limitations on freedom of expression are consistent with the requirements of paragraph 2 above.

The paper argues that Article 10 has been successfully used by private individuals, including journalists, to challenge government interference with their work. The paper also examines how the case law of the European Court has developed in response to new technologies, such as the internet, and how it has adapted to changing social and political conditions.
I. Introduction

The right to freedom of expression and information is guaranteed by Article 10 of the European Convention for the protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (hereafter: the European Convention, or: the Convention) in all 47 member states of the Council of Europe, from Norway to Cyprus, from Iceland to Azerbaijan and from Portugal to Russia. The way Article 10 of the Convention has been interpreted and applied by the European Court of Human Rights and has been promoted by the Council of Europe, has manifestly helped to upgrade and improve the level of freedom of expression and media freedom in countries that became member states of the European Convention after the fall of the Berlin Wall (9 November 1989), such as the Baltic states (Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia), the Czech Republic and Slovenia. But also in countries that already had a longstanding constitutional and democratic tradition, the right to freedom of expression and information has been broadened, strengthened, updated and upgraded under the influence of Article 10 of the European Convention, especially regarding discussions on matters of public interest, in protecting newsgathering activities and journalistic sources, whistleblowing, access to public documents, media pluralism and internet freedom. In other Council of Europe member states with less solid democratic institutions or with growing pains towards democracy, press freedom and freedom of (political) expression is still a very problematic issue, such as in Turkey, Azerbaijan, Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, Serbia, Ukraine and Hungary. Article 10 of the Convention has become a crucial instrument however to motivate, to stimulate or even to compel the national authorities of the member states to abstain from interferences in freedom of speech and press freedom, to respect freedom of public debate, political expression and critical journalism to a higher degree and to promote media pluralism and internet freedom. This paper explores some of the characteristics and developments of the European Court’s case law regarding media, journalism and freedom of expression and information, applying Article 10 of the Convention.

II. Freedom of expression and the European Court of Human Rights

Article 10 of the European Convention reads as follows:

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. This Article shall not prevent States from requiring the licensing of broadcasting, television or cinema enterprises.

2. The exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary.

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8 For more information about the Council of Europe, see <www.coe.int>.

9 See the positive developments in these countries reflected in the press freedom indexes of Reporters without Borders and Freedom House.
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An important aspect that has helped to develop and enforce this right is the strict scrutiny by the European Court of Interferences by national authorities in freedom of expression on matters of public interest, and especially regarding the freedom of political expression and the role of the press as “public watchdog”. The recognition by the European Court of a horizontal effect of Article 10 and of the positive obligation to protect rights to receive, gather, express and impart information contributed to the strengthening of the right to freedom of expression in Europe. Another important factor that contributes to a substantial and sustainable impact of Article 10 is the high level of protection the Court has recognized vis-à-vis journalistic sources, whistleblowers, gathering of news and information, and more recently, the right of access to information held by public authorities and freedom of expression and information in online media and access to the Internet. The Court has significantly upgraded freedom of expression of individuals, journalists, academics, opinion leaders, NGOs and activists, resulting in their right to receive, gather, express and impart information contributing to the public debate in society. In a judgment of 25 June 2013 in the case of Youth Initiative for Human Rights v. Serbia, for instance, the European Court of Human Rights has reaffirmed the importance of NGOs acting in the public interest: “when a non-governmental organisation is involved in matters of public interest, such as the present applicant, it is exercising a role as a public watchdog of similar importance to that of the press”. In Ahmet Yildirim v. Turkey the Court has explicitly recognised the right of individuals to access the internet. In its ruling against the wholesale blocking of online content (on Google Sites), it asserted that the internet has now become one of the principal means of exercising the right to freedom of expression and information.

In recent years, restrictive trends in the approach of the Strasbourg Court have been identified, especially in a number of Grand Chamber judgments. The outcome and rationale of some judgments in which the Court has found no violation of the right to freedom of expression have raised some concerns regarding the (future) level of protection of press freedom in Europe compared to the traditional high standards of the Strasbourg case law in this matter. A similar concern is also reflected in dissenting opinions in annex to some recent judgments finding no violation of Article 10 of the Convention. However, surveying the Court’s jurisprudence of the last years shows that the

(Concluded.)

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Article 10(1) stipulates the principle of the right to freedom of expression, while Article 10(2), by referring to “duties and responsibilities” that go together with the exercise of this freedom, opens the possibility for public authorities to interfere with this freedom by way of formalities, conditions, restrictions and even penalties. Yet, the main characteristic of Article 10(2) is precisely that, by imposing the so-called “triple test”, it substantially reduces the possibility of interference with the right to express, receive and impart information and ideas. Interferences by public authorities are only allowed under the strict conditions that any restriction or sanction must be “prescribed by law”, must have a “legitimate aim” and finally and most decisively, must be “necessary in a democratic society.”

The European Court’s case law over a period of 35 years illustrates how the Court’s jurisprudence has manifestly helped to create an added value for the protection of freedom of expression, journalistic freedom, freedom of the media and public debate in the member states of the Convention. Article 10 of the Convention as interpreted by the European Court has substantially contributed to the guarantee of a higher level of protection of freedom of expression in addition to the constitutional protection in the member states and complimentary to other international treaties protecting freedom of expression and information.3

1 In only a few cases the Court came to the conclusion that the condition “prescribed by law”, which includes foreseeability, precision and publicity of accessibility or which implies a minimum degree of protection against arbitrariness, was not fulfilled, such as in ECHR 24 September 1992, Case No. 10533/89, Heczeghaly v. Austria; ECHR 23 September 1998, Case No. 24838/94, Steel and Others v. UK; ECHR 25 November 1999, Case No. 25594/94, Hashem and Harrag v. UK; ECHR 14 March 2002, Case No. 26229/05, Gavveda v. Poland; ECHR 25 January 2005, Case Nos. 37069/97, 37101/97, 51437/05 and 12028/04, Karademauro and Others v. Turkey; ECHR 17 January 2006, Case No. ECHR 17 January 2006, Case No. 36046/04, Soisie and Others v. Finland; ECHR 18 July 2006, Case No. 75615/01, Štefancic v. Czech Republic; ECHR 27 September 2007, Case No. 30160/04, Dehavuddin v. Turkey; ECHR 17 June 2008, Case No. 32283/04, Mellier Ltd. and Mesrop Movsesyan v. Armenia; ECHR Grand Chamber 14 September 2010, Case No. 38224/03, Somoto Urgelles V. w. the Netherlands; ECHR 25 October 2011, Case No. 27525/07, Akçam v. Turkey; ECHR 29 March 2011, Case No. 50084/06, RTE v. Belgium; ECHR 18 December 2012, Case No. 31111/10, Ahmet Yıldırım v. Turkey and ECHR 25 June 2013, Case No. 48135/06, Youth Initiative for Human Rights v. Serbia.

2 The case law mentioned in this article focuses on the European Court’s jurisprudence since April 1979 (ECHR 26 April 1979, Case No. 653874, Sunday Times (e) v. UK, the first judgment in which the Court found a violation of Article 10) until July 2013 (ECHR 23 July 2013, Case No. 33287/10, Sampaio e Paiva de Melo v. Portugal) : all together nearly 1000 judgments related to Article 10 ECHR, freedom of expression, media and journalism.

3 Other institutions and instruments of the European Convention of Human Rights and the Council of Europe play an important role in monitoring and maintaining freedom of expression as guaranteed under Article 10 ECHR, such as the Committee of Ministers’ supervision of the execution of the Court’s judgments (www.coe.int/dghl/monitoring/execution/default_en.asp) and the Commissioner of Human Rights who plays a prominent role in protecting and monitoring respect for human rights in the Council of Europe’s member states (www.coe.int/commissioner/human_rights_en.asp). By promulgating resolutions, declarations and recommendations, the Parliamentary Assembly, the Committee of Ministers and the Ministers responsible for Media and New Communication Services promote the awareness and develop guarantees for securing freedom of expression, e.g. in relation to reporting, protection of journalistic sources, access to official documents, the right to reply, public service media, independent regulatory authorities in de media sector, media pluralism, coverage of election campaigns, the media in the context of the fight against terrorism, blasphemy, religious insult, hate speech and the application of freedom of expression principles on the internet and the new media environment. Aspects of freedom of expression are also reflected in and guaranteed by some Council of Europe Conventions, such as the Revised European Convention on Transfrontier Television (EUCTV, CETS no. 32) and the European Convention on Access to Official Documents of Europe (CETS no. 205). The Council of Europe also promotes professional standards in the media and self-regulatory formats stimulating journalistic ethics or respecting ethical and basic democratic values on the Internet and in the new media, online media environment. See

3 Exceptional constitutional law or international treaties guarantee freedom of expression to a higher level : e.g. Article 19 and 25 of the Belgian Constitution prohibiting prior restraint (see also ECHR 29 March 2011, Case No. 50084/06, RTBF v. Belgium) and Article 19 of the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR - 1966, in force since 1976), guaranteeing freedom of expression, including the freedom “to seek” information and ideas. Article 19 ICCPR also explicitly guarantees the freedom of expression “in the form of art”. See also General Comment No. 34, Article 19: Freedoms of Opinion and Expression, CCPR/C/GC/34, UNHRC 2011.
Court’s case law related to Article 10 of the Convention is still maintaining high standards of freedom of expression, media pluralism and protection of journalists, hence obliging member states to secure within their jurisdictions a higher threshold of freedom of expression and information. The Grand Chamber judgments of 7 February 2012 in Axel Springer AG v. Germany and in Von Hannover (n° 2) v. Germany13 have, as a recent findings of violations of Article 10 in several cases of protection of journalistic sources14 and in a series of judgments in relation to critical reporting by media and investigative journalism15 clearly illustrate the awareness of the European Court regarding the importance of freedom of expression and information in a democratic society. Especially the multiple references in the Court’s recent case law to the danger of a “chilling effect”16, and its impact on the finding of unjustified interferences with media and journalists, help to secure a higher standard of freedom of expression and information through the interpretation and the application of Article 10 of the Convention. In Kaprzykowski v. Poland (3 April 2012) the ECtHR emphasized that it “must exercise caution when measuring the sanctions taken or sanctions imposed by the national authorities are such as to dissuade the press from taking part in a discussion of matters of legitimate public concern (...)”. The chilling effect that the fear of criminal sanctions has on the exercise of journalistic freedom of expression is evident (...). This effect, which works to the detriment of society as a whole, is likewise a

(Cord.)

13 ECtHR Grand Chamber 7 February 2012, Case No. 39954/08, Axel Springer AG v. Germany and ECHR 7 February 2012, Case No. 40660/08 and 60614/08, Von Hannover (n° 2) v. Germany.

14 ECtHR 15 December 2009, Case No. 821/03, Financial Times Ltd. a.o. v. UK; ECHR Grand Chamber 14 September 2010, Case No. 38224/03, Sanoma Uitgevers BV v. Netherlands; ECHR 12 April 2012, Case No. 30002/08, Morin o.a. v. France; ECHR 28 June 2011, Case No. 15054/07 and 15060/07, Resirot o.a. v. France; ECHR 22 November 2012, Case No. 39315/06, Telegraf Media Nederland Landelijke Media N.V. and Others v. the Netherlands; ECHR 18 April 2013, Case No. 2641/90, Saint-Paul Luxembourg S.A. v. Luxembourg and ECHR 16 July 2013, Case No. 73496/10, Nagla v. Latvia.


16 E.g. when criminal law is applied to prosecute and sanction journalists while reporting on matters of public interest, or in cases of prior restraint or when severe sanctions are imposed on media of journalists. In desamplified case they does no longer accept prison sentences ECHR (GC) 17 December 2004, Case No. 33349/05, Čupmánč v. Slovakia; Romania; ECHR 18 December 2008, Case No. 38757/06, Mohtadev and Abazadeh v. Azerbaijan and ECHR 6 July 2010, Case No. 37751/07, Mărvăpot v. Finland.

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Until a few decades ago, the limits and restrictions of freedom of expression were determined by national states, ultimately scrutinised by their own domestic judicial authorities, without any further external control. This situation, this ‘paradigm’ has significantly changed in Europe, due to the achievement of the European Convention of Human Rights and the enforcement machinery in which the European Court of Human Rights plays a crucial role.18

With the judgment in the case of Sunday Times (n° 1) v. the United Kingdom19 it has become clear that Article 10 of the European Convention is effectively reducing the national sovereignty and the scope of national limitations restricting the right to freedom of expression and information. The judgment clarified that freedom of expression and information is not only to be respected by government and parliament, but also by the judicial authorities in the member states.20 Most importantly the Court emphasized that freedom of expression “constitutes one of the essential foundations of a democratic society. Subject to paragraph 2 of Article 10, it is applicable not only to information or ideas that are favourably received or regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population.”21 It also stated that this freedom “is subject to the exceptions set out in Article 10 § 2, which must, however, be interpreted narrowly.” The Court held that there had been a violation of Article 10 by reason of an injunction restraining the publication in the Sunday Times of an article concerning a drug (thalidomide) and the litigation and damage claims linked to its use. The injunction, based on the common-law concept of contempt of court, was not found to be “necessary in a democratic society” in the eyes of the Court. With the judgment in the Sunday Times case the European Court established, albeit hastily at the time,22 a higher level of protection for journalistic reporting on matters of public interest, also recognising “the right of the public to be properly informed” about matters of interest for society.

An abundant case law of the European Court of Human Rights has made clear that national law prohibiting, restricting or sanctioning expressions or information as forms of expression communication may only be applied if the interference by the authorities is prescribed by law in a sufficiently precise way, is non-arbitrarily applied, is justified by a legitimate aim and most importantly is to be considered “necessary in a democratic society.” It is the European Court itself that has determined and

17 ECtHR 3 April 2012, Case No. 43206/07, Kaprzykowski v. Poland.


19 ECtHR 26 April 1979, Case No. 65387/84, Sunday Times (n° 1) v. UK. A few years before, in its first judgment on freedom of expression (ECtHR 7 December 1976, Case No. 5493/72, Handside v. UK), the Court emphasized the importance of freedom of expression in a democratic society, but in case found no breach of Article 10 of the Convention, as the protection of minors was considered to justify the interference by public authorities against the “Little Red Schoolbook” and its publisher, Mr. Handside.

20 Regardless of how precisely the European Convention is internally applied or guaranteed in the member states (monistic or dualistic approach). In some countries the European Convention is given precedence over national law and the provisions of the Convention have direct effect; in other countries the Convention has been ‘indirectly’ incorporated into domestic law (e.g. in the UK by the Human Rights Act 1998 or in Germany by an approval in the Constitution, the so-called ‘Zustimmungsgezet’ under Art. 59 of the German Constitution (Grundgesetz)). See also D.J. Harris, M. O’Boyle, E.P. Bates and C.M. Buckley, Law of the European Convention on Human Rights (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2009).

21 Indeed, with only a small majority (11/9), the European Court came to the conclusion that there was a violation of Article 10 ECHR, overturning the House of Lords regarding its interpretation of a specific common-law application.
elaborated the characteristics of the vague and open notion of what can be considered necessary in a democratic society in terms of limiting freedom of expression and information. The Court has reiterated on many occasions that freedom of expression is applicable not only to information or ideas that are favourably received or regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference, but also to those that "offend, shock or disturb". According to the Court's case law, an open, pluralistic and democratic society by itself is the most effective, if not the only, guarantor of respect for civil, political, cultural and social rights and freedoms. This means that Article 10 has to be interpreted from a perspective of a high level of protection of freedom of expression and information, even if expressed opinions or information are harmful to the State or some groups, enterprises, organisations or public figures. As set forth in Article 10, freedom of expression is subject to exceptions, which must, however, be construed strictly. The need for any restrictions must be established convincingly, precisely because freedom of expression is considered essential for the functioning of a democratic society.

If there are no sufficient and pertinent reasons for an interference in one's freedom of expression or media content or if an interference by the authorities is disproportionate to the legitimate aim pursued, the sanctioning of individuals, journalists, editors, publishers, or broadcasters on the basis of even legitimate, sufficiently precise, transparent and non-discriminatory national law restricting freedom of expression, is considered by the Strasbourg Court as violating Article 10 of the Convention. The dynamic interpretation by the Court of what is to be considered "necessary in a democratic society" together with the limitation of the "margin of appreciation" by the member states has been crucial for the impact of Article 10 of the Convention on the protection of freedom of expression in Europe.

IV. From Sunday Times (n° 1) in 1979 to Sampajo e Paiva de Melo in 2013

With the Sunday Times (n° 1) case as a starting-point, followed years later by the judgments in Barthold v. Germany and Lingens v. Austria, many European countries have been found in violation with Article 10 after journalists, publishers, broadcasting organisations, individual citizens, civil servants, academics, politicians, artists, activists or non-governmental organisations applied to the European Court as a victim of an illegitimate, unjustifiable or disproportionate interference in their freedom of expression. As a consequence of this case law by the Strasbourg Court and due to the binding character of the Convention, the member states are under a duty to modify and improve their standards of protection of freedom of expression in order to comply with their obligations under the European Convention (Article 1).

This approach affects particularly the level of protection of journalistic reporting, political debate and discussion on matters of public interest, pushing back some traditional limitations of freedom of expression in many countries, limitations which can no longer be considered as justified in a democratic society. In some cases the European Court itself imposed the government of the defendant state to take concrete measures in order to have the applicant's freedom of expression and information immediately restored and respected, like in "Fattalayev v. Azerbaijan" (order of immediate release from prison of journalist convicted for defamation of public authorities) or in Youth Initiative for Human Rights v. Serbia (ordering that the Intelligence Agency of Serbia should provide the applicant NGO with the information requested).

At the same time the European Court is also an important actor in preserving press freedom against new initiatives restraining that freedom. The Court's case law reveals opposition against introducing new limitations or imposing additional obligations that risk to neglect the important role of critical and independent media in a democratic society. A good illustration is the judgment of the European Court in the case Mosley v. the United Kingdom in 2011. The European Court of Human Rights decided that the right of privacy guaranteed by Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights does not require media to give prior notice of intended publications to those who feature in them. Having regard to the chilling effect to which a pre-notification requirement risked giving rise, to the doubts about its effectiveness and to the margin of appreciation afforded to the defendant state in this matter, the European Court was of the opinion that Article 8 did not require a legally binding pre-notification requirement.

In another case, Wegrzynowski and Smolcewski v. Poland, the Court delivered an important judgment regarding a request for removal of an online newspaper article. The case concerned the complaint by two lawyers that a newspaper article damaging to their reputation - which the Polish courts, in previous libel proceedings, had found to be based on insufficient information and in breach of their rights - remained accessible to the public on the newspaper's website. The Court is the opinion that the newspaper was not obliged to completely remove from its Internet archive the article at issue. It accepts that the State complied with its obligation to strike a balance between the rights guaranteed by Article 10 and, on the other hand, Article 8 of the Convention. The Court is of the opinion that the removal of the online article for the sake of the applicant's reputation in the circumstances of the present case would have been disproportionate under Article 10 of the Convention, as a rectification or an additional comment on the website would have been a sufficient and adequate remedy.

The European Court of Human Rights has also reinforced the right of individuals to access the internet, in a judgment against wholesale blocking of online content. In its judgment, the Court asserted that the internet has now become one of the principal means of exercising the right to freedom of expression and information. The European Court is of the opinion that the decision taken and upheld by the Turkish authorities to block access to Google Sites amounted to a violation of Article 10 of the Convention. As a consequence, the order, in the absence of a strict legal framework, was not prescribed by law. The judgment further makes clear that the Turkish courts should have had regard to the fact that such a measure would render large amounts of information inaccessible, thus directly affecting the rights of internet users and having a significant collateral effect. It is also observed that the Turkish law had conferred excessive powers to an administrative body in the implementation of a blocking order originally issued in relation to a specified website. As the effects of this measure have been arbitrary and the judicial review of the blocking of access to internet websites has been insufficient to prevent...
abuses, the interference with the applicant’s rights in the case of Ahmet Yildirim v. Turkey amounted to a violation of Article 10 of the Convention.30

The most recent judgment integrated in this analysis is the one in the case Sampaio e Paiva de Melo v. Portugal. A journalist who published a book in which he criticised the chairman of a world famous football club (M.P.C.), had been convicted for defamation. He was ordered to pay a fine and an award of damages because of some allegations against the chairman of the football club, calling him inter alia “a sworn enemy” of the national football team and referring to criminal procedures in which he was involved. The Court emphasised that the book was to be situated in a debate of public interest, it observed that the allegations and critical remarks published in the book were unrelated to the private-life of M.P.C. and that the allegations and negative value-judgments expressed in the book had also a sufficient factual basis. The Court came to the conclusion that the conviction of the journalist was a breach of Article 10 of the Convention, taking into consideration the danger of a chilling effect.31

In between Sunday Times (n° 1) v. the United Kingdom in 1979 and Sampaio e Paiva de Melo v. Portugal in 2013, the European Court has determined and clarified the scope and the limits of the right to freedom of expression in Europe in about 1000 judgments. Especially in the last 15 years, since its reform in 1999, the European Court has frequently come to the conclusion that the right to freedom of expression has been violated by a member state.32 In many other cases the Court agreed however with the defending State and declared the application inadmissible or, in a later stage, came to the conclusion that an interference was in accordance with the “triple test” of Article 10 of the Convention, finding no violation of freedom of expression.

The practical and effective impact of Article 10 still differs from one member state to another, which by itself is an indication of the somewhat weak enforcement instruments of the Convention and of the very different levels of development of democracy and respect for human rights in the Convention’s member states. During the last years, Turkey, one of the 13 founding States of the Convention in 1950,33 has been found over and over again to have acted in breach of the right to freedom of (political) expression.34 The situation in terms of freedom of expression and information is also very problematic in some of the “new” member states, especially in Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, Azerbaijan and Ukraine, but also in Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Croatia and Hungary. Disrespect for freedom of expression and information and press freedom in these countries goes hand in hand with violations of other fundamental human rights and freedoms. On the other hand, the countries with a high level of press freedom, as also reported in the

V. Article 10 and its contribution to a more transparent democracy

Already in its judgment in the Sunday Times (n° 1) in 1979 the Court has emphasised the “right of the public to be properly informed” about matters of public interest. It is remarkable to observe how the Court, has reiterated, emphasised and operationalised the importance of the right to receive information, including the right to seek and to gather information. The Court has also “created”, within the perspective of Article 10, the right to have access to documents national authorities are inclined to keep away from the public eye.

The Court’s case law reflects particular attention to the public interest involved in the disclosure of information, contributing to debate on matters of public interest: “In a democratic system the acts or omissions of government must be subject to the close scrutiny not only of the legislative and judicial authorities but also of the media and public opinion. The interest which the public may have in particular information can sometimes be so strong as to override even a legally imposed duty of confidentiality.”35 In such circumstances a journalist, a civil servant, an activist or a staff member of an NGO should not be prosecuted or sanctioned because of breach of confidentiality or the use of illegally obtained documents.36 The Court has accepted that the interest in protecting the publication of information originating from a source which obtained and retransmitted the information unlawfully may in certain circumstances outweigh those of an individual or an entity, private or public, in maintaining the confidentiality of the information. A newspaper that has published illegally gathered emails between two public figures, directly related to a public discussion on a matter of serious public concern, can be shielded by Article 10 of the Convention against claims based on the right of privacy as protected under Article 8 of the Convention.37

In its Grand Chamber judgment in Stoll v. Switzerland, the Court confirmed that “press freedom assumes even greater importance in circumstances in which State activities and decisions escape democratic or judicial scrutiny on account of their confidential or secret nature. The conviction of a journalist for disclosing information considered to be confidential or secret may discourage those working in informing the public on matters of public interest. As a result the press may no longer be able to play its vital role as “public watchdog” and the ability of the press to provide accurate and reliable information may be adversely affected.”38 In cases in which journalists reported about confidential information in a sensationalist way39 or in which the revealed documents did not concretely or effectively contribute to public debate or only concerned information about the private

30 ECHR 18 December 2012, Case No. 31111/10, Ahmet Yildirim v. Turkey.
31 ECHR 23 July 2013, Case No. 33287/10, Sampaio e Paiva de Melo v. Portugal.
32 In hundreds of cases the Court found a violation of Article 10. However, it is to be underlined that only a very small minority of the applications introduced in Strasbourg lead to a final judgment by the European Court, as most applications in an early stage are considered inadmissible for diverse reasons, e.g. for not fulfilling the condition of exhaustion of all (relevant) domestic remedies, for the lack of status as a "victim," for not applying within a period of six months or because the application is considered manifestly ill-founded (Art. 35 ECHR).
33 The 13 European States that signed the European Convention of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms in 1950 were Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Turkey and the United Kingdom.
34 In about 200 cases the Court has found a violation of freedom of expression by the Turkish authorities. In a few cases the Turkish government negotiated a friendly settlement, recognising that Turkish law and practice urgently needed to be brought into line with the Convention’s requirements under Article 10 ECHR. The procedure for EU-membership of Turkey has proved to have only minor positive influences with regard to the respect for human rights in general and specifically freedom of political expression in Turkey. Freedom of the press, freedom of artistic expression and political speech and demonstrations are still systematically interfered with by the Turkish authorities, violating structurally Articles 10 and 11 of the Convention. See e.g. ECHR 14 September 2010, Case No. 26680/07, 6102/08, 30079/08, 707209 et 712469/D, Duck v. Turkey and ECHR 21 February 2012, Case No. 32131/08 and 41617/08, Teyip v. Turkey.
40 ECHR Grand Chamber 10 December 2007, Case No. 69698/01, Stoll v. Switzerland.
life of the persons concerned, the Court accepted (proportionate) interferences in their freedom of expression.

In the Grand Chamber judgment in Guja v. Moldova, the Court recognised the need of protection of whistleblowers by Article 10 of the Convention. The Court noted "that a civil servant, in the course of his work, may become aware of in-house information, including secret information, whose divulguation or publication corresponds to a strong public interest. The Court thus considers that the signalling of a civil servant or an employee in the public sector of illegal conduct or wrongdoing in the workplace should, in certain circumstances, enjoy protection. This may be called for where the employee or civil servant concerned is the only person, or part of a small category of persons, aware of what is happening at work and is thus best placed to act in the public interest by alerting the employer or the public at large." Although disclosure should be made in the first place to the person's superior or other competent authority or body, the Court accepted that, when such a practice is clearly impractical, the information could, as a last resort, be disclosed to the public. The Court held that the dismissal of a civil servant for leaking two confidential letters from the public prosecutor's office to the press was in breach of Article 10 of the Convention, also referring to the serious chilling effect of the applicant's dismissal for other civil servants or employees, discouraging them from reporting any misconduct. In Bucur and Thoma v. Romania the Court considered that the general interest in the disclosure of information revealing illegal activities within the Romanian Intelligence Services (RIS) was so important in a democratic society that it prevailed over the interest in maintaining public confidence in that institution. The Court was not convinced that a formal complaint to a Parliamentary Commission would have been an effective means of tackling the irregularities within RIS. It also observed that the information about the illegal telecommunications surveillance of journalists, politicians and business men that had been disclosed to the press affected the democratic foundations of the State. Hence it considered very important issues for the political debate in a democratic society, in which public opinion had a legitimate interest. The conviction of Bucur for the disclosure of information on the illegal activities of RIS to the media was considered as a violation of Article 10 ECHR. In its judgment the Court also relied on Resolution 1729(2010) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on protecting whistleblowers.

Especially in cases where information is published on alleged corruption, fraud or illegal activities in which politicians, civil servants or public institutions are involved, journalists, publishers, media and NGOs can count on the highest standards of protection of freedom of expression. The Court has emphasised that "in a democratic state governed by the rule of law the use of improper methods by public authority is precisely the kind of issue about which the public has the right to be informed." The Court expressed the opinion that "the press is one of the means by which politicians and public opinion can verify that public money is spent according to the principles of accounting and not used to enrich certain individuals." Defamation laws and proceedings cannot be justified if their purpose is to prevent legitimate criticism of public officials or the exposure of official wrongdoing or corruption. A right to sue in defamation for the reputation of officials could easily be abused and might prevent free and open debate on matters of public interest or scrutiny of the spending of public money.

The European Court has made clear that in a democratic society, in addition to the press, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), campaign groups or organisations, with a message outside the mainstream must be able to carry on their activities effectively and be able to rely on a high level of freedom of expression, as there is "a strong public interest in enabling such groups and individuals outside the mainstream to contribute to the public debate by disseminating information and ideas on matters of general public interest such as health and the environment." In a democratic society public authorities are to be exposed to permanent scrutiny by citizens and everyone has to be able to draw the public's attention to situations that they consider unlawful. The Court has also argued that freedom of expression is of particular importance for persons belonging to minorities.

An interference by public authorities by means of prosecution or other judicial measures with regard to the journalist's research and investigative activities calls for the most scrupulous examination from the perspective of Article 10 of the Convention. It is based on this perspective that journalistic sources enjoy a very high level of protection in terms of Article 10 of the Convention. According to the Court, "protection of journalistic sources is one of the basic conditions for press freedom, as is recognised and reflected in various international instruments including the Committee of Ministers Recommendation (...). Without such protection, sources may be deterred from assisting the press in informing the public on matters of public interest. As a result the vital public-watchdog role of the press may be undermined and the ability of the press to provide accurate and reliable information may be adversely affected. Having regard to the importance of the protection of journalistic sources for press freedom in a democratic society and the potentially chilling effect an order of source disclosure has on the exercise of that freedom, such a measure cannot be compatible with Article 10 of the Convention unless it is justified by an overriding requirement in the public interest." Searches and confiscations of journalistic material in order to reveal the identity of an informant can hardly be justified from this perspective. On several occasions, the European Court was
of the opinion that searches of media offices, the home and place of work of journalists or reporters amounted to a violation of Article 10 of the Convention.52

An important development is the Court’s recent shift towards approaching access to public documents from the perspective of Article 10 of the Convention. For a long time, the Court refused to apply Article 10 in cases of refusals of access to public documents.53 However, in a 2007 judgment the Court expressed its opinion that “particularly strong reasons must be provided for any measure affecting this role of the press and limiting access to information which the public has the right to receive,” implicitly recognising at least a right of access to information. In the spring of 2009 the Court delivered two important judgments in which it recognised the right of access to official documents. The Court made clear that when public bodies hold information that is needed for public debate, the refusal to provide documents in this matter to those who are requesting access is a violation of the right to freedom of expression and information as guaranteed under Article 10 of the Convention. In TASZ v. Hungary the Court’s judgment mentioned the “censorial power of an information monopoly” when public bodies refuse to release information needed by the media or civil society organisations to perform their “watchdog” function. It also considered that the State had an obligation not to impede the flow of information sought by a journalist or an interested citizen. The Court referred to its consistent case law in which it has recognized that the public has a right to receive information of general interest and that the most careful scrutiny on the part of the Court is called for when the measures taken by the national authority are capable of discouraging the participation of the press, one of society’s “watchdogs,” in the public debate on matters of legitimate public concern, even when those measures merely make access to information more cumbersome. The Court emphasized once more that the function of the press, including the creation of forums for public debate, is not limited to the media or professional journalists. Indeed, in the present case, the preparation of the forum of public debate was conducted by a non-governmental organisation. The Court recognized society’s important contribution to the discussion of public affairs and qualified the applicant association, which is involved in human rights litigation, as a social “watchdog.” In these circumstances the applicant’s activities warranted Convention protection similar to that afforded to the press. Furthermore, given the applicant’s intention to impart the requested information to the public, thereby contributing to the public debate concerning legislation on drug-related offences, its right to impart information was clearly impaired.54


54 ECHR 27 November 2007, Case No. 42648/05, Timpal Info-Magazin and Anghel v. Moldova.


Towards a more Transparent Democratic Society

In Kenedi v. Hungary the European Court held unanimously that there had been a violation of the Convention, on account of the excessively long proceedings - over ten years - with which Mr. Kenedi sought to gain and enforce his access to documents concerning the Hungarian secret services. The Court also reiterated that “access to original documentary sources for legitimate historical research was an essential element of the exercise of the applicant’s right to freedom of expression.” The Court noted that Mr. Kenedi had obtained a court judgment granting him access to the documents in question, following which the domestic courts had repeatedly found in his favour in the ensuing enforcement proceedings. The administrative authorities had persistently resisted their obligation to comply with the domestic judgment, thus hindering Mr. Kenedi’s access to documents he needed to write his study. The Court concluded that the authorities had acted arbitrarily and in defiance of domestic law, a violation it held, therefore, that the authorities had missed their powers by delaying Mr. Kenedi’s exercise of his right to freedom of expression, in violation of Article 10.56

More recently the European Court has reiterated that “the gathering of information is an essential preparatory step in journalism and is an inherent, protected part of press freedom” and that “obstacles created in order to hinder access to information which is of public interest may discourage those working in the media or related fields from pursuing such matters. As a result, they may no longer be able to play their vital role as “public watchdogs,” and their ability to provide accurate and reliable information may be adversely affected.”57 Referring to TASZ v. Hungary the European Court stated explicitly “that the notion of ‘freedom to receive information’ embraces a right of access to information”. The Court is of the opinion that as the applicant NGO, Youth Initiative for Human Rights, was obviously involved in the legitimate gathering of information of public interest with the intention of imparting that information to the public and thereby contributing to the public debate, there has been an interference with its right to freedom of expression. The Court found that the restrictions imposed by the Serbian intelligence agency, resulting in a refusal to give access to public documents, did not meet the criterion as being prescribed by law, and therefore violated Article 10 of the Convention. The Court’s recognition of the applicability of the right to freedom of expression and information in matters of access to official documents is undoubtedly an important new development which further expands the scope of application of Article 10 of the Convention.58

VI. Conclusions and Challenges

The challenge for the future is to bring more European Convention member states in line with the European Court’s case law. Still many national authorities in Europe do not meet the Article 10 standards of respect for freedom of expression of their citizens. Also freedom of newsgathering and independent and critical reporting by journalists and NGOs is still insufficiently protected or guaranteed at national level. Important steps still need to be taken in order to create access to information and transparency on matters of interest for society. Protecting and effectively guaranteeing these rights is a crucial step towards developing the quality of democracy, guaranteeing the respect for human rights and ultimately helping to realise a more sustainable, and hence a better, world to live in.

52 ECHR 26 May 2009, Case No. 31475/05, Kenedi v. Hungary. The Court came to the conclusion that in this case Article 13 (effective remedy) had also been violated since the Hungarian system did not provide for an effective way of remedying the violation of the freedom of expression in this situation. The Court found that the procedure available in Hungary at the time and designed to remedy the violation of Mr. Kenedi’s Article 10 rights had been proven ineffective. There had, therefore, been a violation of Article 13 read in conjunction with Article 10 of the Convention.


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