

# The hidden cost of austerity in Greece: Silencing dissent and independent media - report

A report by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) paints an apocalyptic picture of the media landscape in Greece. Citing as reasons the 'long standing weakness' of the mainstream media, the country's financial crisis and the government's 'authoritarian stance', FIDH found out that free speech and independent journalists in Greece are under attack



public criticism, according to a report published by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and its Greek branch the Hellenic League of Human Rights.

In its survey entitled 'Downgrading rights: the cost of austerity in Greece' the human rights organisation said authorities were clamping down on free speech with 'an increasingly authoritarian stance.'

"This is evident in the way authorities have clamped down on protesters, restricting their right to demonstrate and assemble, but also in the systematic assault that has been conducted against freely dissenting voices," it said.

The group points to the country's dramatic fall on the World Press Freedom Index which ranked it 99th in 2014, 15 positions below 2013 and a staggering 68 from 2008. It also cites Reporters Without Borders (RSF) which has qualified this decline as 'disturbing' and a signal that 'the European model is unravelling'.

The FIDH attributed this deterioration in standards to the country's financial crisis and the 'long standing weakness' of the mainstream media.

"The economic crisis has issued a final blow to freedom of speech and information by hindering effective and quality reporting," it said, adding that the Troika had turned a blind eye to the impact austerity was having.

"Both print and broadcast media outlets have been either shutdown or subject to serious cutbacks – an issue met with indifference by the Troika."

"Such outlets have also been subject to incidences of censorship and politically-motivated attacks."

## Eleven areas of press freedom suppression in Greece

Below is a list of examples and case studies provided by the FIDH demonstrating the extent of press freedom suppression.

### 1. Pressure against those who speak out against the bailout

Several sources consulted during FIDH's field mission stated that pressure is also directed against those who attempt to speak out against or criticise the bailout agreements and related austerity plans, or to denounce the widespread corruption and misadministration that contributed to causing the crisis. Index on Censorship reports that in some cases this has gone as far as TV and radio station management personnel, sometimes under pressure from government, issuing clear instructions to employees not to include certain information in news reports and not to report on certain issues, threatening them with sanctions or dismissal should they refuse.

Thanos Dimadis, correspondent for Greek TV and radio station SKAI, reported that he was instructed by his director not to disclose information that bailout payments had been only 'partial' and carried out 'under a regime of strict economic surveillance' in October 2012. As he refused to do so, his text was removed from SKAI TV's website. [...] Also, FIDH conducted interviews with correspondents at several media outlets, who reported similar episodes but asked to remain anonymous.

### 2. Human rights violations under-reported: The case of Farmakonisi

Moreover, the information provided in news stories often provides only one side of the story, usually the official version. Apostolis Fotiadis reports, in an article written for IPS in September 2011, the case of a private channel caught adding sound effects to scenes of an attack by protesters against policemen, following the shooting of 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos by a police officer in 2008. A non-manipulated version, leaked on YouTube immediately afterwards, only showed the sound of a gun being fired.

### 4. Cover-up of links between Golden Dawn and the police

This is particularly evident in cases concerning protesters where Golden Dawn is involved, especially when it comes to exposing alleged links between the neo-Nazi movement and police forces.

The case reported by [The Guardian](#) in October 2012 and referred to above [The Guardian had alleged that police tortured protesters in Athens police headquarters following a demonstration in September 2012] is also emblematic. Index on Censorship reports that not only national media neglected to report on what happened, including on torture allegations by protesters that claimed having been subjected while under arrest to practices that their lawyer described as 'Abu-Ghraib style humiliation', but even following disclosure of this information by the British newspaper, coverage of the story by national media was partial, and did not allow to contrast the official version provided by the government. Christos Syllas, "Greece: Freedom of expression takes a beating", 31 December 2013.

### 5. Investigative journalism under aggression

Those who express criticism over the internet or by other means are also subject. Reuters reporter at the time, involved in investigating major banking scandals, who is regularly pictured by news outlets close to the political and corporate elites as 'a fake reporter' or a suspect of 'criminal deeds'.

Intimidation from political extremists, be it the far-left or neo-Nazis, is also common practice, as are attacks perpetrated by security forces and the police against those attempting to cover demonstrations.

### 6. Covering protests a "war zone"

On some occasions this has caused serious harm. Working conditions are particularly difficult during demonstrations. Here, reporters, and especially photographers, operate in an environment which RSF has qualified as similar to that of a war-zone. Caught between the police, who can see them as unwanted witnesses to abuse, and activists who see them as an arm of the government, these professionals pay a heavy price for recording what they see. Indeed, attacks against them are never condemned and hardly ever investigated, thus encouraging these practices to continue. Greece has become one of the very few countries in Europe where reporters are forced to take precautions in order to exercise their right to self-expression.

### 7. Lack of government transparency leads to indirect censorship

Moreover, access to government data that is officially available by law but very hard to obtain in practice, results in indirect censorship in the form of limited access to information and sources. This is particularly evident regarding international news agencies and foreign correspondents, and has worsened since however, online censorship is not limited to websites used by activists to gain support for demonstrations or express political views. Everyone is potentially targeted as on-line surveillance and phone tapping have become common practice in Greece. Against a weak legal framework, which basically fails to regulate online activities, privacy in communications is almost non-existent. The same is true for anonymity. Indeed, on-line activities are increasingly criminalised, allowing for wide exceptions to people's right to privacy and freedom of expression. As a result, the online environment is also exposed to systematic abuse. As the crisis has made the authorities more exposed to criticism, state control over on-line activities with the aim of silencing dissent has also intensified and the space for free expression over the internet has shrunk.

### 10. Media moguls threaten press independence

Media independence is also threatened in Greece. In a country where a considerable number of mainstream media have traditionally been controlled by a few magnates, press freedom has always been at risk. However, the economic and financial crisis has brought to the surface and exacerbated the weaknesses of an already defective media market. As substantial layoffs have also affected this sector, already low salaries have been further cut, making journalism one of the country's poorest-paid professions. Moreover, as the sector's collective labour agreements have expired and dismissal has loomed over both public and private media employees, media professionals have become increasingly vulnerable and exposed to increased and widespread self-censorship.

### 11. The public broadcaster's shutdown

The most dramatic attack on freedom of expression and free and independent media followed refusal by the prime minister to comply with the highest court's order.

ERT was purportedly closed due to 'a scandalous lack of transparency', abuses and waste by its workforce, and in order to meet the Troika's demands for 2,000 more public-sector cuts. Shutting down the state broadcaster, which resulted in the dismissal of 2,700 workers at six hours' notice, Minister Simos Kedikoglou said 'the party's over'. The statement was considered deeply offensive by former ERT employees, especially when most waste and corruption that afflicted ERT was allegedly attributable to questionable government choices in buying expensive programmes or hiring people. Although reforms may have been needed to address existing flaws, it is regrettable that these were not further thought through, to safeguard the right to free expression and information for both media professionals and the public.

Also, when looked at more carefully, ERT's closure has not resulted in savings but rather occasioned over 300 million euros of losses in compensation and rights. Furthermore, it opened the way to private broadcasters to take over lucrative franchises that were left after ERT was dismantled to gain control over the future TV market and the information that reaches the public, in cooperation with politicians.

The cessation of ERT's operations not only silenced the only, albeit flawed, public broadcaster in Greece but also paved the way for further closures in other public sector structures.

The black screen left on the ERT channel and the handcuffed gates at the entrance of the former broadcaster following its closure are among the most symbolic and

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