How Associations of Journalists Protect Press Freedom in Europe

By Judith Pies

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Project Brief

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The project aims at enhancing Freedom of Expression in Lebanon through the promotion of media law reform as a priority on the national agenda and improvement of the environment for media coverage on the transparency and accountability of elections process.

The project supports the publication of background papers produced by Maharat Foundation on the local Lebanese context and by MJRC on the European standards and best fit recommendations for Lebanon.

The papers cover 6 main themes:
Protection of journalists and their sources, Associations of journalists, Decriminalization, Incentives, Innovation, and Regulation, co-regulation and self-regulation opportunities for the media.

Disclaimer:

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MJRC is an independent media research and policy think tank that seeks to improve the quality of media policymaking and the state of independent media and journalism through research, knowledge sharing and financial support. The center's main areas of research are regulation and policy, media ownership and funding, and the links between tech companies, politics and journalism.

Maharat Foundation

Maharat Foundation is a women-led freedom of expression organization based in Beirut dedicated to campaigns grounded in research and strengthening connections between journalists, academics, and policy makers.
It advances and enables freedom of expression, quality information debate and advocates for information integrity online and offline. Maharat promotes innovation and engages the journalistic community and change agents within Lebanon and the wider, MENA region to promote inclusive narratives and debates and to counter misinformation, disinformation, and harmful content.

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Executive summary

This paper delves into the landscape of journalists' associations, focusing on the EU context with implications for the Lebanese media scene.

The central questions of defining who qualifies as a journalist and delineating the relationship between press freedom and state intervention form the center of the analysis. The absence of a uniform European Union-wide definition for journalists prompts an examination of practices in member states, emphasizing the pivotal role of journalists' associations in navigating these uncertainties. The issuance and significance of press cards in identifying journalists are scrutinized. While not mandatory in most EU states, press cards serve as valuable tools for journalists, aiding in interactions with law enforcement, judicial authorities, and event organizers. The criteria for obtaining press cards vary, encompassing factors such as employment status or publication frequency.

The paper also delves into journalists' associations' engagement in self-regulation, emphasizing the advantages of flexibility and responsiveness. Journalistic codes of ethics and participation in press or media councils are explored as mechanisms for maintaining professional standards. The significance of socio-economic rights for journalists within the EU are underscored, particularly in light of economic challenges and the unique status of freelancers.

The socio-economic landscape of journalism, coupled with the diverse activities of journalists' associations, shapes the media landscape in Europe. Challenges such as declining membership and financial constraints within these associations are acknowledged, prompting reflections on collaborative initiatives, regional networks, and international affiliations as potential strategies to address fragmentation and ensure sustained advocacy for journalists' rights.

In conclusion, the paper provides a comprehensive overview of the multifaceted issues referring to journalists' associations in Europe, offering insights for shaping the dynamics of the media landscape in Lebanon and beyond.

1. Introduction

The history of journalism and its professionalization is manyfold in Europe, and so is the history of journalists' associations. Today, the right of assembly and association is accepted as a fundamental right within the European Union (EU). What unites all associations is the ongoing struggle with two central questions, also relevant for the current Lebanese context: How to define who a journalist is, what journalism's relation to the state means, and how to ensure press freedom.[1] Accordingly, academic literature often tackles journalists' associations within the process of professionalization of journalism or within the structures of self-regulation against state intervention. This comes with the assumption that "an association [is] to advance professional standards, legitimate the status of the profession, develop collective ideology and support the individual and collective autonomy of the members of the profession."[2]

Digitization has increased the need to tackle these issues in recent years. Bloggers, citizen journalists or other content creators have become central parts of the digital public sphere. In addition to media organizations, digital platforms such as Meta, Google, X (formerly Twitter) or others are determining how journalistic content is distributed. For journalism that means that it not only has to tackle the relation towards the state but also towards new actors of content creation and content distribution. Parallel to that, the media industry has been struggling economically. That has rapidly brought questions of economic and social security back on the agenda of journalists' associations. The COVID-19 pandemic was another factor increasing the need to address this issue.

The first national journalists' associations in Europe were founded in the late 19th century with the aim to raise their members' social and economic status. This is why socio-economic questions have always been on the agenda of most journalists' associations in Europe. Struggles for socio-economic improvement have also diversified the landscape of journalists' associations in many countries. In Germany for example, the two biggest associations in number distinguish themselves from each other by their mission: while the German Journalists Union (DJU) predominantly addresses socio-economic issues, the German Journalists Association (DJV) claims to be a lobbyist for socio-economic and professional issues in journalism.

[1] Svennok Høyer, & Epp Lauk. (2016). Frames and Contradictions of the Journalistic Profession. In K. Nordenstreng, U. J. Björk,F. Beyersdorf, S. Hoyer & E. Lauk (Eds.), A History of the International Movement of Journalists. Professionalism Versus Politics. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137530554
[2] Epp Lauk, & Kaarle Nordenstreng. (2017). Journalists' Associations as Political Instruments in Central and Eastern Europe. Media and Communication 5(3), 67–69. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v5i3.1177 .
[3] https://dju.verdi.de/ueber-uns
[4] https://www.djv.de/startseite

In recent times, new associations have been established representing certain groups within journalism (e.g., freelancers or specialized journalists) or campaigning for specific issues (e.g., data journalism, investigative journalism, media ethics). This diversification of the field can also be noticed in Lebanon, where the Alternative Journalists' Association was founded in 2019 and NGOs have been working on issues that had traditionally belonged to the sphere of journalists' associations.

A roundtable discussion in Beirut in July 2023 organized by the Maharat Foundation and Legal Agenda in cooperation with the Media and Journalism Research Center (MJRC) addressed the aforementioned questions. This paper aims to provide answers by summarizing the status quo and current discussions in EU member states on: Who is a journalist? What rights and obligations do journalists have and how do journalists' associations safeguard them? How is the field of journalists' association structured?

The paper is based on academic literature and updated by an analysis of self-descriptions of journalists' associations as well as recommendations and reports submitted to the EU and the European Council.

2. Who is a journalist?

There is no EU wide definition of who a journalist is, either in legal terms or in recommendations by transnational organizations. In the EU, laws make a reference to who is considered a journalist only in France and Belgium. In Belgium, the law defines who may be regarded as a professional journalist as follows: "the person must have engaged in journalism as their main professional activity for two years and exercise this activity on behalf of a general news media outlet."[5] In France the law says, "anyone whose main, regular and paid occupation is the exercise of their profession in one or several media outlets, daily or periodical publications, or press agencies and who earns most of their income in this way is considered to be a journalist."[6] One specific feature of the French legislation is to grant full journalist status to freelance journalists (pigistes) in the same way as salaried employees. This is noteworthy because the status of freelance journalists in France differs substantially from that of freelancers in other countries, who are often excluded from collective agreements and from the system of social protection for employees.[7]

"Journalist" is not a protected professional title, either. Italy is an exception. To work as a journalist, individuals must register with the Ordine dei Giornalisti (Order of Journalists). To be accepted, they have to hold a professional qualification recognized by the order, a certain age and experience.[8] Yet, in all other countries of the EU there is no definition to protect the title "journalist."

The lack of clear-cut definitions derives from the idea of freedom of expression. Everyone has the right to express his/her opinion and to publish it without prior permission. The notion of a public sphere in which everyone – at least theoretically – has the right to reach out to society without a gatekeeper is another normative argument for the openness of the profession. Journalists and their professional organizations in many countries have opposed a binding or regulatory legal definition fearing that the parliament or political authorities would restrict their freedoms. This has led to a constant balancing between keeping the profession open and at the same time safeguarding a minimum of shared norms and practices. Journalists' associations have been playing a vital role in this balancing process.

[5] Elvira Drobinski-Weiss. (2018). Report: The status of journalists in Europe. Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, Committee on Science, Culture, Education and Media.https://pace.coe.int/en/files/24287#trace-2
[6] Elvira Drobinski-Weiss. (2018). Report: The status…, cit.
[7] Elvira Drobinski-Weiss. (2018). Report: The status…, cit.
[8] Roger Blum. (2014). Lautsprecher & Widersprecher. Ein Ansatz zum Vergleich der Mediensysteme. (An approach to comparing media systems). Köln: Herbert von Halem; Sergio Splendore. (2018). Italy. In S. Fengler, T. Eberwein, M. Karmasin (Eds.), The European Handbook of Media Accountability. London, New York: Routledge.

Despite the lack of a definition, there has been a debate whether laws should distinguish journalists from other publishers, such as citizen reporters, at a time when everyone can publish publicly through blogs or social media. The debate mainly addresses the so-called privileges of journalists. One refers to the right of journalists not to reveal their sources to the police or the court. Courts normally decide on such cases. In recent years, court rulings and regulation efforts in EU member states shifted the focus from the rights of journalists to protect their sources to the rights of the sources to be protected. In the Netherlands for example, in 2018 the Source Protection Act in Criminal Cases provides strengthened protection for the confidentiality of journalists' sources. According to the new law, there is always a preliminary consideration by a judge before the police can have access to a source's data, which is only possible in case of preventing a serious crime.[9] Data privacy laws and whistleblower protections are among the means underpinning this approach (cf. paper on protection for journalists and their sources).

A second privilege is the right to access information from public institutions. In many EU countries, access to information laws include a special ruling on journalists' access to information. This is why identifying as a journalist might become relevant in practice.

2.1 Who issues press cards to whom?

Press cards have become a means of identifying journalists; journalists' associations are often the ones issuing them. The right to distribute press cards in EU member states is not in the hand of the state; it is (in most cases) not even in the hand of one particular association. Several associations are equally entitled to issue press cards, though in some countries there have been agreements among associations to issue a "central press card"[10] or to delegate the issuance to an umbrella organization.[11] In most EU member states, the press card does not necessarily define the status of a journalist in practice, as in most cases it is not mandatory to have it. But it has become a useful means for journalists to identify as a journalist, particularly to the police, to judicial authorities or as invitees to press conferences and in similar situations.

[9] European Federation of Journalists. Netherlands: New 'Source Protection Act' finally enters into force. 4 October 2018. https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2018/10/04/netherlands-new-source-protection-act-finally-enters-into-force/
[10] In Germany, six journalists' and publishers' associations have been accepted by the press council (an independent organization of journalists and publishers) as institutions to issue a central press card. Nevertheless, other organizations are free to issue their own press cards.
[11] In Spain, around 40 associations have agreed that an umbrella organization, the Federation of the Press Associations of Spain (Federación de Asociaciones de la Prensa de España, FAPE) issues press cards.

The most common requirement to get a press card is having a full-time job as a journalist or that at least 50% of one's yearly income is generated from journalism. To prove journalistic work, either journalistic articles, videos, and so forth, or contracts and documents of the income can be submitted to the press card issuing organization. Regularly publishing or broadcasting news to the public is also a fundamental aspect of journalism. EU states typically consider the dissemination of information through traditional media outlets, online platforms, social media, or any other means that reach a significant audience as publishing. In some countries, further criteria are applied. For example, in Belgium and Croatia, the intent of publication matters; people who work in advertising are not accepted to get a press card. Elsewhere, for example in Germany, publishing is expected to be in the public interest. Several EU countries (e.g., Lithuania and Italy) consider educational background and qualifications when determining journalistic status for the press card, but most do not. Completion of journalism studies or relevant courses can be a factor, but some countries prioritize practical experience and professional track record over formal education, or at least accept both equally. In some countries, issuing organizations require the approval of the employer to issue the card (e.g., Lithuania, Portugal, Czech Republic). However, some countries (e.g. Slovakia, Norway) also acknowledge freelance journalists, but often only if they are members of one of the associations issuing the press card. This is why membership in the issuing organizations is often a relevant factor for claiming to be a journalist. Membership of a journalists' association can be an advantage when journalists are sued. In such a case, the courts can justify the journalist's status by the fact that he or she is a member of the association.

It is important to note that the list of factors described above is not exhaustive, and the specific combination of criteria for determining journalistic status for the issuance of press cards may vary among EU member states.[12]

[12] The European Federation of Journalists links to all its European membership associations and is hence a good starting point to study missions and regulations of journalists' associations in Europe (not only EU). See https://europeanjournalists.org/members/ .

3. Associations and their involvement in safeguarding journalists' rights and obligations

3.1 Involvement in self-regulation

Obligations for journalists can be formulated on different levels with different degrees of authority. In EU countries, journalistic activities are regulated by a wide range of instruments including state regulation, co-regulation and self-regulation. Journalists' associations play different roles in these processes. In this paper, only self-regulatory issues will be tackled, for state- and co-regulation (see study on regulation, self-regulation and co-regulation in this project). Compared to state- or co-regulation, there are two major advantages to self-regulation. First, it is more responsive, more flexible and can adapt to the changing circumstances of the media. Second, above all it avoids any kind of direct political interference. This is why self-regulation is particularly relevant for journalists' associations. However, it also requires "a substantial degree of organization and compliance with decisions by all of those concerned (professional organizations, employers' associations, civil society and individual journalists)."[13]

In general, the terms "self-control" or "self-regulation" refer to practices that members of the profession initiate to motivate responsible media performance and monitor journalistic output, building on the absence of state interference.[14] The established forms of self-regulation, in which journalists' associations traditionally have a say, include the formulation of codes of ethics and the involvement in press- or media councils.[15]

Within the realm of media ethics, journalists are free to voluntarily follow the obligations formulated in a code of ethics. Such codes exist on the level of profession but also on the level of media organizations. According to the "Media Councils in the Digital Age" project, the codes commonly mention the following principles: being fair, reporting facts, being independent, being responsible towards society, and respecting internet-specific guidelines. They also regularly include the rights of journalists.[16]

[13] Elvira Drobinski-Weiss. (2018). Report: The status…, cit.
[14] Manuel Puppis. (2009). Organisationen der Medienselbstregulierung: Europäische Presseräte im Vergleich (Organizations of Media Self-Regulation: European Press Councils in Comparison). Cologne, Halem Verlag.; Hans-Bredow-Institut. (2006). Final Report: Study on Co-Regulation Measures in the Media Sector.
[15] The Journal of Media in the Middle East published a special issue on media accountability in the region, in which Ayman Georges Mhanna and Karim Safieddine wrote an article on Lebanon. The Arabic version can be found here: https://www.qu.edu.qa/static_file/qu/conference/jmem2017/Vol/16/JMEM%20Arabic.pdf
[16] English translations of codes of ethics from 45 countries (mostly European) can be found and searched in detail by core principles, countries, changes made or inclusion of aspects relevant to the digital age (e.g., mentioning the use of AI, data reporting, social media materials etc.) on the project's website https://www.presscouncils.eu/ethical-codes-database/codes/

While journalists' associations in all EU member states have formulated codes of ethics, not all EU member states have a functioning press council. The countries with a functioning press council include Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Austria, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. In Spain and Belgium press councils exist on a regional instead of a national level. Estonia has two competing institutions. The history, structures and reputation of such councils vary among the states.[17] The press council as a voluntary institution independent of the state to monitor media coverage and journalists' activities has its roots in the Scandinavian countries. The idea behind a press council is to preserve the quality of the media and restore the prestige of the media in the eyes of the public; and at the same time, it shall help protect freedom of speech and the autonomy of the profession. In those countries where press councils exist their structure varies considerably. What they have in common is: (1) a code of ethics forms their normative basis; (2) the public and/or other professionals have the right to complain about any article they consider to run against the code of ethics; (3) a committee that decides over the complaints consists mostly of representatives from the profession and the media industry.[18] Scholars argue that in order to have a real instrument of accountability towards the public press councils should include representatives from the public, too.[19] The measures to sanction misbehavior in the profession range from non-public reprimand to corrections and counter-statements. The factors determining the impact of press councils to ensure compliance with the obligations include visibility in the public, the acceptance of the system by media companies, their cooperation in discussing complaints and the role the council plays in settling issues outside of courts. Experts on self-regulation agree that press councils in Finland, Norway and Sweden seem to be the closest to the ideal of self-regulation and have high prestige within the profession.[20]

In addition to professional organizations, media organizations themselves have a stake in taking care of ensuring journalists' obligations through measures of quality management, for example. These include editorial codes and guidelines, ombudspersons, and other things. The role of journalists' associations here could be to encourage or support media organizations in establishing or improving quality management, for example through programs for fake news detection, material on how to implement and work with an ombudsperson and so on.[21]

[17] On the website https://www.presscouncils.eu/comparative-data-on-media-councils/ you find a database of press and media councils in Europe, which can be easily searched and compared for many questions related to the nature of press councils. An academic conclusion of such a comparison can be found in: Tobias Eberwein, Susanne Fengler, Katja Kaufmann, Janis Brinkmann & Matthias Karmasin. (2018). Summary: Measuring media accountability in Europe – and beyond. In: T. Eberwein,, S. Fengler, M. Karmasin (Eds.), The European Handbook of Media Accountability. London, Routledge.
[18] Tobias Eberwein, Susanne Fengler, Tanja Leppig-Bork, Julia Lönnendonker, Judith Pies. (2011). Medieninnovationen – Neue Chancen für die Medienselbstkontrolle? Erste Ergebnisse einer international vergleichenden Studie (Media innovations – new opportunities for media self-control? First results of an international comparative study). In: J. Wolling, A. Will & C. Schumann (Eds.), Medieninnovationen. Wie die Medienentwicklungen die Kommunikation in der Gesellschaft verändern (Media innovations. How media developments are changing communication in society). Konstanz: UVK.
[19] Claude-Jean Bertrand. (2000). Media Ethics and Accountability Systems. Transcation Publisher.
[20] Tobias Eberwein, Susanne Fengler, Katja Kaufmann, Janis Brinkmann, Matthias Karmasin. (2018). Summary: Measuring…, cit.
[21] In Tunisia, ombudspersons have been established in community radios and materials are available in Arabic, for example cf. https://tu-dortmund.sciebo.de/s/qKjRpFzaEkifN2C.

3.2 Safeguarding and improving journalists' socio-economic rights

The socio-economic situation of journalists plays a pivotal role in upholding the principles of democracy, that is, journalists not having conflicts of interests is important to ensure a free and informed society. Within the European Union, a general framework of rights and protections exists to safeguard workers' socio-economic wellbeing. For journalism, references are made to international labor conventions[22] or frameworks on human rights, like to the EU Charter for Fundamental Rights[23] or the European Convention on Human Rights.[24] Several recommendations exist to support and improve the situation in member states.

In 2019, the European Federation of Journalists published a Charter on journalists' working conditions. The following prerequisites for good working conditions are formulated in 10 articles:[25]

1. **Freedom of association** "including the right to form and to join trade unions or professional associations for the protection of his/her interests (as foreseen by the article 11 of ECHR)"
2. **Right to a written contract** "referring to the standards set by the International Labour Organisation"
3. **Right to collective bargaining** including the relations between workers and employers, "in particular terms and conditions of work"
4. **Non discrimination in employment** "based on gender, religion, national origin, race, color or sexual orientation including equal payment"
5. **Right to rest** (paid holidays and limited working hours) **and to disconnect** from professional engagement (emails, internet, social media etc.)
6. **Right to protect journalistic sources** including whistleblower protection
7. **Right to refuse to sign a content** and not to be responsible in court "when the content of his production has been substantially changed by its employer"
8. **Safety and protection**, for example, "through training and awareness-raising for reporting in hostile or danger zones, including targeted support for women staff, to attend first aid training covered by employers and to request employers' actions to monitor and combat forms of online abuse and to have tools to report forms of violence, threats and harassment at work, namely against sexual harassment"
9. **Good governance and ethical standards**
10. **Decent working conditions**, which are "part of the obligations of its employer who must regularly implement all the legal obligations that are related to the employees"

[22] International Labour Organization https://www.ilo.org/global/lang--en/index.htm
[23] EU Charter for Fundamental Rights https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12012P/TXT
[24] European Convention on Human Rights (available in Arabic) https://www.echr.coe.int/european-convention-on-human-rights
[25] European Federation of Journalists. (2019). The Charter of Journalists' Working Conditions (full document). https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2019/02/12/the-charter-on-journalists-working-conditions-full-document/

Additionally, the EU Commission has formulated recommendations on how to strengthen the safety of journalists and other media professionals. Among other things, the Commission calls for economic and social protection.[26] Such protection includes social insurance, maternal leave, financial backing in the case of prosecution, reasonable working hours, adequate remuneration, and protection against unfair dismissal, and so on.[27]

Yet, the socio-economic situation of journalists in most EU member states is deteriorating due to economic hardships in the media industry. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased economic uncertainty in the media industry after a steep decline in advertising revenues, leading to widespread layoffs and increased pressure on an already challenged industry. Concerns about equal working conditions have increased with hybrid working spaces that, from the employer's perspective, make work more efficient (less working space is needed, travel costs are lower, etc.), but come with exhaustion, blurring boundaries between work time and personal time and challenges around technology and tools, as well as IT security.[28]

The socio-economic situation greatly differs between EU countries, between genders and between different journalistic statuses. For example, journalists in central and eastern Europe get lower pay compared to their western European counterparts, and legal defense for journalists is not necessarily guaranteed by employers.[29] According to an estimate from 2011, more than a third of journalists working in the EU are freelancers or have temporary contracts.[30] In many countries, their status is rather weak compared to those employed and enjoying employees' rights (such as a defined number of vacation days, fixed working hours, working space security) and services (e.g. health care, insurances for unemployment, maternal leave).

Their incomes are mostly lower than those of employed colleagues and they often lack the ability to pay membership fees for associations, legal advice, on-the-job-training, and so on. An increasing number is taking up additional work, such as in PR or corporate communication, while the number of people working as full-time journalists as their main job continues to fall. In Germany, a study revealed that their number decreased from 18,000 in 1993 to 12,000 in 2005 and just 9,600 in 2017.[31]

[26] European Commission. (2021). Protection, Safety and Empowerment of Journalists Commission Recommendation. Fact Sheet.https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/redirection/document/79308

[27] European Commission. State of the Union: Commission calls on Member States to improve journalists' safety across the EU. 16 September 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_4632

[28] Federica Cherubini, Nic Newman, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. (2020). Changing newsrooms 2020: addressing diversity and nurturing talent at a time of unprecedented change. Reuters Digital News Report. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/changing-newsrooms-2020-addressing-diversity-and-nurturing-talent-time-unprecedented-change#header--1

[29] D. Boshnakova, & D. Dankova, D. (2023). The Media in Eastern Europe. In: S. Papathanassopoulos, & A. Miconi. (Eds.), The Media Systems in Europe. Springer Studies in Media and Political Communication. Springer, Cham. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-031-32216-7_7

[30] Economisti Associati. (2011). Feasibility study for the preparatory action "ERASMUS for journalists". PART 2 - Statistical Review. Submitted to the EU Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/information_society/media_taskforce/doc/mobility/erjo_part2_report.pdf

[31] Nina Steindl, Nina, Corinna Lauerer, & Thomas Hanitzsch. (2018). "The future is freelance!" The state of the freelance journalism in Germany. Journalism Research, 1/2018, 25-36. https://journalistik.online/en/edition-012018-en/the-future-is-freelance/

This is why in 2018 a report on the status of journalism in Europe to the Council of Europe recommended:

"Where freelancers are concerned, they could be included within the scope of labour legislation in terms of minimum pay, which would avoid having to consider regular freelancers from the perspective of competition laws. Professional organisations of journalists should adapt to societal changes. The status of journalist should be adaptable, as its essence lies in the tasks and not in the legal definition. One good example is that of Great Britain and the Nordic countries where press cards are granted in relation to the activity and not the definition set out in the labour contract or the collective agreement."[32]

Another aspect of socio-economic rights acknowledges the economic value of journalistic endeavors, the intellectual property rights. It addresses the copyright protection for journalists' works, ensuring that journalists have control over the use and dissemination of their creations. In ongoing debates, journalists' associations have taken a stand on the issue, but have often failed to consider freelancers sufficiently. In Germany, this was one reason among others why some freelancers quit their membership in the associations.[33]

Journalists' associations are actively working to improve the situation. They campaign on national and EU level as the above-mentioned Charter by the European Federation of Journalists (EJF) demonstrates. On a national level, they negotiate for better contract conditions and deals for their members with companies in the areas of transportation, accommodation, technical equipment and so on. They support journalists with information on employees' rights or make honorarium, incomes or contract conditions transparent. Depending on the (financial) strength of the association, it may offer legal advice, such as the German Journalists' Association (DJV), which offers support regarding starting a business, checking contracts for freelancers, employment contracts and certificates, support in the event of copyright infringement, fee disputes, collective agreement issues, part-time, parental or maternity leave, maternity and social security matters or tax issues.[34]

[32] Elvira Dobrinski-Weiss. (2018). Report: The status…, cit.
[33] https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/70-jahre-deutscher-journalistenverband-auf-der-suche-nach-100.html
[34] Website of the German Journalists' Association (Deutscher Journalistenverband, DJV), Services for Members https://www.djv.de/startseite/service/mitgliederservice/rechtsschutz

4. Journalists' associations: activities and landscape

There are many types of journalists' associations and trade unions in the EU, operating in different professional, economic and political environments. There are no clear-cut factors grouping countries along media system typology. Distinctions can be found between "strong collective rights (France) or weak collective rights (the United Kingdom), strong representation (Nordic countries) or weak representation (France), legal recognition or social dialogue (France, Italy, Belgium and Germany) and the quasi-absence of social partners (Central Europe)."[35] The structure of the landscape of journalists' associations and unions as well as their activities still refer to how they started in the 19th century: "first as social clubs, then as interest organizations and finally as combined organizations representing both economic demands and professional values."[36]

The functions taken on by unions and professional associations today include:

- representation in media organizations (staff /employee council)
- establishing and running media councils
- media policy lobbyists
- watchdogs of press freedom violations
- initiatives for quality in journalism
- service providers for members, such as legal consultancy, labor protection
- providing or distributing trainings
- networking in the industry, educational sector, civil society organizations and so on.

All these tasks need funding, which is, as it is for media organizations, an increasing challenge. This goes along with decreasing membership, traditionally the main income of journalists' associations. Journalists' associations face the challenge of young people and people working remotely shying away from becoming members. In Germany, for example, the number of members in one of the two biggest associations, DJV, has decreased by 10.000 between 2003 and 2019.[37]

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[35] Elvira Dobrinski-Weiss. (2018). Report: The status..., cit.
[36] Svennik Høyer, & Epp Lauk. (2016). Frames and Contradictions of the Journalistic Profession. In: K. Nordenstreng, U.J. Björk, F. Beyersdorf, S. Hoyer & E. Lauk. (Eds.), A History of the International Movement of Journalists. Professionalism Versus Politics. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
[37] Vera Linß. Auf der Suche nach mehr Sexyness. 70 Jahre Deutscher Journalistenverband (Looking for more sexiness: 70 years of German Journalists' Associations). 10 December 2019. Deutschlandfunk. https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/70-jahre-deutscher-journalistenverband-auf-der-suche-nach-100.html

Professional associations for journalists in Central and Eastern Europe have fewer members, limited organizational structures, and limited financial resources compared to their western counterparts. In some countries, such as Hungary, the landscape of journalists' associations is particularly fragmented, with multiple associations that may be divided along ideological lines. As described above, Estonia has two competing press councils. This can make it difficult for journalists to come together and advocate for their rights and interests and can also contribute to a lack of cohesion and coherence in the profession.[38] In countries categorized as politically polarized media systems, under which Lebanon could also be grouped, this fragmentation might hinder the establishment of a sound media accountability infrastructure.[39] But there are also some promising ways of dealing with such a fragmentation. In Belgium and Spain, journalists organize on a regional level with regional codes of ethics and media councils; Italian journalists have been trying to counteract their fragmentation with a strong (though not unproblematic in terms of freedom of expression) single association policy. In Germany, after a year-long bargaining between different journalists' associations, six of them agreed to a coalition with regard to the issuance of a central press card.

Journalism itself is becoming increasingly fragmented but at the same time collaborative in practice, for example with investigative journalism networks, and so is the landscape of organizations claiming to represent journalists' interest. Southeast European countries (non-EU members) have gathered in regional coalitions that are also affiliated with international journalists' associations to ensure continuity for their work. Regional coalitions have developed fundraising skills that ensure, to varying extents, a degree of sustainability of their programs. One example is the SafeJournalists network, which brings together various southeast European journalists' associations and trade unions, and which issues alerts and reports about attacks on reporters, informing the international community and other journalists of problems in the region.[40] European umbrella organizations such as the European Federation of Journalists,[41] the European Freelance Assembly[42] or projects such as the Media Councils in the Digital Age project, discussed above, might also work as good starting points for networking and support.

[38] D. Boshnakova & D. Dankova. (2023). The Media in Eastern Europe…, cit.
[39] Susanne Fengler, Tobias Eberwein, Matthias Karmasin, Sandra. Barthel, & Dominik Speck. (2022). Media Accountability: A Global Perspective. In: S. Fengler, M. Karmasin & T. Eberwein (Eds.), The Global Handbook of Media Accountability. London, New York: Routledge.
[40] Center for International Media Assistance. (2021). United by Challenge: Regional Opportunities to Drive Media Reform in Southeast Europe. CIMA Digital Report. https://www.cima.ned.org/publication/united-by-challenge-regional-opportunities-to-drive-media-reform-in-southeast-europe/
[41] https://europeanjournalists.org/
[42] https://ejc.net/for-funders/programmes/freelance-journalism-assembly

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the currents of journalistic associations in the EU reveal a landscape shaped by historical legacies, digital transformations, and economic uncertainties. The resilience of journalists' associations in navigating these currents, while contending with challenges, signifies a commitment to upholding the principles of a free and informed society.

The absence of a standardized EU-wide definition for journalists underscores the openness of the profession in an era where the boundaries of journalistic practice have become fluid, incorporating traditional and non-traditional actors within the digital realm. Nevertheless, journalists' associations try to keep an eye on the access and acceptance to the journalistic field by defining criteria for the issuance of press cards.

At the same time, the goal of preserving autonomy against the state remained. The formulation of codes of ethics and participation in press or media councils stand as a testament to the profession's commitment to upholding rigorous standards and navigating the evolving contours of journalistic responsibility, on the one hand. On the other hand, they use these to prevent too much state interference.

Journalists' socio-economic rights, integral to the preservation of democratic principles, face headwinds in the wake of economic challenges compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite a framework of international labor conventions and recommendations, socio-economic disparities persist among journalists across EU member states, demanding ongoing advocacy for equitable working conditions to uphold individual economic independence.

The diversification of journalists' associations, reflective of a changing media landscape, introduces both opportunities and challenges. While these associations engage in multifaceted activities, from representation and advocacy to quality initiatives and service provision, they grapple with declining membership and financial constraints. Collaborative endeavors, regional networks, and international affiliations emerge as potential lifelines in addressing fragmentation and sustaining advocacy efforts.

6. Recommendations

The paper offers an overview of good and bad practices in journalists' association in the EU, which could serve as a basis to provide inspiration in the Lebanese context. Based on the analysis in this paper, a few general recommendations can be made:

The question of who a journalist is and who should receive a press card should be a matter for the profession itself, to better guarantee the freedom to inform the public without pressure or influence from the state or other actors of power.

Membership in journalists' associations should be open and feasible to all those working in the field of journalism, especially young people working in journalism and related fields. A division between freelancers and employees or journalists working in traditional media and online media is not advisable, given the blurring boundaries of content creation in the digital era.

A diversification of journalistic associations does not necessarily mean a weakening of the profession. Yet, a distinction between those who own and finance media outlets and those acting as journalists should be kept. Associations active in the field of economic and professional representation of journalists should work together–if not on all aspects, at least where joint coalitions help secure press freedom.

Journalists' associations could seek support and network with associations inside and outside the country and use (internationally) available resources and materials, for example for awareness raising, training,[43] and so on. Collaborations with associations outside the profession, for example for legal advice or technical support could also be helpful in overcoming scarce resources and as a fast extension of necessary skills and competences.

[43] For freely available training materials see for example, https://help.elearning.ext.coe.int/

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