

MFRR **SLOVAKIA MISSION REPORT:
GROWING MEDIA CAPTURE, RISING
DISINFORMATION AND THREATS
TO SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS**



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The following report presents an urgent assessment of the deteriorating state of media freedom in Slovakia, based on findings from a fact-finding mission conducted on 25-26 November 2024 by the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) partners.

The mission was led by the International Press Institute (IPI) and joined by ARTICLE 19 Europe, the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) and the European Center for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF). The MFRR delegation met with leading media organizations, press freedom advocates, members of Parliament, and members of the diplomatic corps to discuss key challenges to media freedom in the country and explore potential solutions.

The mission also met with Jan Kubis, foreign affairs advisor to President Pellegrini. Despite efforts to secure meetings with the government including the President, the Prime Minister's office and the Minister for Culture, our requests were turned down or went unanswered. We regret the government's apparent reluctance to discuss its record on media freedom.

We extend special thanks to Sally-Ann Wilson, the Public Media Alliance, and the Consultative Network of the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC) for their contributions to the mission and the report.

MEDIA FREEDOM RAPID RESPONSE



International
Press
Institute



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INTRODUCTION

The media landscape in Slovakia is facing an unprecedented crisis, serving as a critical test case for the European Union's commitment to safeguarding media freedom and democratic values.

Since the re-election of populist leader Robert Fico and the formation of a new government in October 2023, the environment for freedom of expression, media pluralism and independent journalism has become increasingly hostile. Journalists have been subjected to legal harassment, intimidation, smear campaigns and verbal abuse. Meanwhile, the SMER-led government dismissed the leadership of the previous public broadcaster (RTVS) and replaced it with a new legal entity (STVR) over which it is able to exercise disproportionate influence thanks to the regulations in place.

The actions of the current Slovak government not only jeopardise the country's media landscape but also pose a significant challenge to EU-wide efforts to protect media freedom and democracy, particularly in light of the newly adopted European Media Freedom Act (EMFA).

Under international and European human rights standards and as a member of the Media Freedom Coalition, the Slovak government has an obligation to foster a safe and enabling environment for media and journalists. Instead, it became clear to the mission that the current government is chipping away at legal protections for the freedom of the media and fueling an increasingly hostile environment for journalists.

The report provides a comprehensive analysis of the current threats to media freedom in Slovakia, their implications for EU media policy, and recommendations for urgent action to reverse this troubling trend. It is intended to inform the international community and EU policymakers and serve as a basis for developing targeted interventions to protect and strengthen media independence in Slovakia and across the European Union.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Erosion of legal protection and hostile environment:** The Slovak government is chipping away at legal protections for media freedom, such as the draft right to reply law, and fuelling an increasingly hostile environment for journalists. This not only undermines media freedom but also poses a significant threat to journalists' safety. The government's open disdain for independent media, coupled with its promotion of 'alternative' outlets known for spreading disinformation, further exacerbates this hostile climate.
- **Continuous impunity for violence against journalists:** The continued failure to fully resolve the murders of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová, remains a stark reminder of the dangers faced by journalists in Slovakia. The government's decision to disband the Special Prosecutor's Office significantly reduces the likelihood of achieving full justice in this case, intensifying concerns over safety of journalists. This action contradicts international standards that call for thorough investigations and prosecutions of crimes against journalists.
- **Public service media independence under threat:** The government's move to dissolve the public broadcaster RTVS and replace it with a new entity, STVR, is a clear attempt to exert control over public service media and its programming. The new structure allows for greater government influence in appointing the broadcaster's leadership, potentially compromising its editorial independence.
- **Undermining independence of media regulator:** The proposal to restructure the media regulator, the Council for Media Services, to concentrate power into the hands of the chair, would undermine its impartiality and strengthen government influence over its decisions. This move directly conflicts with international standards that call for independent media regulatory bodies.
- **Media capture:** The combination of increased control over the public media and initiatives to undermine regulatory independence, along with threats to weaponize state advertising to punish critical journalism, advances media capture and directly conflicts with key principles of the EMFA.
- **EU credibility:** The situation in Slovakia poses a significant challenge to the European Union's credibility and its ability to enforce media freedom standards within its member states. The EU's response to these problems in Slovakia will be of pivotal importance, potentially setting a precedent for how media freedom violations are addressed across the bloc.

MEDIA CAPTURE

Researchers and media freedom analysts generally use [four key elements](#) to assess the level of media capture in a country: the take-over of public service media by government appointments, the political take-over of media regulators to ensure decisions are taken in favour of the parties in power; the use and misuse of state funds, particularly state advertising, to support government allies in the media and to deny government critics of the much-needed revenue, and lastly the use of state levers to create a pliant private media sector whose owners become politically or financially aligned with the ruling parties.

Public Service Media (PSM): Independent public service media play an important role in democracies. Especially in smaller media markets, they provide audiences with public-interest news and information that enables democratic engagement. The European Media Freedom Act, which entered into force in May 2024, includes rules safeguarding the independence of PSM.

RTVS had been the established PSM in Slovakia since January 2011 when Slovak TV and Slovak Radio were merged. RTVS employed many respected and experienced editors and journalists and has enjoyed high levels of independence in recent years. Despite this, leaders of the incoming government made no secret of their intention to take control of and convert STVR into a [state broadcaster](#), akin to the captured public broadcaster in neighbouring Hungary

The campaign to take over public service media started with a 30% [cut in the budget](#) of Radio and Television Slovakia (RTVS) imposed by Parliament at the beginning of 2024. The budget was reduced from 0.17% of GDP in 2022, when direct state funding replaced the license fee, to 0.12% of GDP for 2024, placing intense pressure on RTVS operations.

The Ministry of Culture then proceeded to push through a new media law, approved by the President on June 30, 2024, in what appears to be a clear attempt to restrict the editorial and organisational independence of public media. The law passed, despite warnings by [media freedom groups](#) that it would allow the government to take control of the public media, and the intervention of Vera Jourova, Vice-President of the European Commission, warning that it may breach the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA).

RTVS was hastily dissolved and replaced by a new entity STVR. On July 1, RTVS Director General Luboš Machaj (elected by Parliament to serve until 2027) was replaced by an interim director nominated by the Speaker of the Parliament based on an agreement by the ruling parties. The RTVS Board was also immediately disbanded.

The law also changed the nominations procedure to the STVR Board, which appoints the Director General, expanding the power of the government to select favoured candidates. The board has nine members of which three are nominated by the Ministry of Culture, one by the Ministry of Finance, and five by Parliament. In August, the Minister of Culture [appointed](#) three political allies to the STVR board. Many other posts remain vacant.

During the mission, several sources indicated that changes in the editorial policies of the public broadcaster had already begun, although these changes were described as not being "major" for the time being. The government had previously accused RTVS of bias and of failing to include opinions from outside the mainstream.

Media regulators: Slovakia's broadcast regulator, the Media Services Council, is currently seen as politically independent with a pluralistic board appointed under the previous government. In 2025 the government can replace three members of the board and appoint three more out of a total of nine members. Members are nominated by civil society and elected by a parliamentary majority. While members are not allowed to hold any public office or position within a party, the governing coalition can elect its preferred candidates and thereby exercise considerable political influence.



The MFRR delegation at the memorial of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová with the families of the murdered journalist and his fiancée.
Credits: Ronja Koskinen/IPI

More concerningly, however, the government has published a [proposal](#) to change the structure of the Council from one in which decisions are taken collectively by the Board, to one where decision making is concentrated in the hands of the board's chair. The role of the Board, meanwhile, will be relegated to reviewing appeals against Council decisions. Such a restructuring will enable the government of the day to apply its influence directly through the chair, who it appoints, significantly compromising the remaining levels of independence. Problematically, the government justifies the move as a part of the 'reforms' to bring Slovakia legislation into line with the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA). In practice, however, it represents a move away from the principles of regulatory independence required by EMFA.

Self regulation - Tlacovo-digitalna rada Slovenskej republiky (TRSR): TRSR (the Slovak Digital Press Council) – was established in 2002 by the Slovak Journalists Syndicate and Publishers Association. It lacks resources and support but could provide the basis for a national self-regulatory system supported under EMFA.

State Advertising: The EMFA requires all member states to ensure that procedures of distribution of state advertising are transparent, objective, proportionate and non-discriminatory. Moreover, a regulator must be designated to monitor and issue annual reports on how state funds are spent by public authorities including state owned companies.

In Slovakia [no such rules](#) currently exist beyond the general requirements of public procurement, as a result it is very difficult to measure the use of state advertising and the process is clearly vulnerable to abuse. [Past investigations](#) have revealed a distortion in the expenditure in favour of pro-government media and independent media struggle to receive any forms of public advertising. When Prime Minister Fico was re-elected in October 2023 one of the first [statements](#) he made was to threaten to withdraw state advertising from independent media where he particularly singled out TV Markiza, Slovakia's largest private provider of broadcast news. The lack of transparency about the provision of state advertising makes it very hard to know how the current government may have weaponized state funds.

The Slovak government should prioritize fully implementing the rules set forth in EMFA.

Creating a pliant media sector: There is widespread concern in the media community regarding state pressure on TV Markiza. Just a few weeks after the Prime Minister made his threats, TV Markiza changed its Director of News and introduced tighter editorial procedures for approving news content which led to significant [newsroom protests](#) in early 2024. Markiza journalists [claimed](#) that the independence of the newsroom

was being curtailed and that political coverage was being stifled in order to appease the government. In one episode, Michal Kovacic, the anchor of the broadcaster's lead news show, Na Telo, was fired after he voiced his criticisms of management during one of the shows. TV Markiza have said the changes were necessary to improve editorial standards and not a result of political pressure. During the mission to Bratislava, Lucia Tandlich, Legal and Compliance Director at Markiza emphasised the need to resist political pressure and they expressed support for the implementation of EMFA.

TV Markiza is part of Central European Media Enterprises (CME), which owns several other broadcasters across the region. CME in turn is owned by the Czech based multinational PPF, whose international ownership structure might make it more resilient to political pressure. However, PPF also has several other investments in Slovakia including running the motorway tolls and supplying the state rail with train production. Both of these are dependent on public tenders and for this reason, journalists and media observers expressed concerns that PPF could be the target of political pressure.

Meanwhile, the oligarchic Penta group, whose leaders have been embroiled in past corruption scandals, own media which backed the HLAS and SMER parties during the last elections. Penta is the largest Slovak publisher of printed press, including the most popular weekly magazine Plus7Dní, the tabloid daily, Plus1Deň, the only Slovak economic weekly Trend, and many popular monthlies. In 2023, it also acquired the most popular daily newspaper Nový Čas giving Penta a near-monopoly over the tabloid press market. The merger is still being reviewed by the Slovak anti-monopoly office, which can block a merger if the resulting company commands over 60% of the media advertising market.

SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS

The media landscape in Slovakia has become increasingly hostile. [Orchestrated smear campaigns and online harassment](#) have become primary tools for undermining trust in independent, quality journalism. Notably, these campaigns are often driven by disinformation platforms. Women journalists are especially targeted with online harassment.

The climate of fear in the media community is exacerbated by the [ongoing impunity](#) over the murders of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová, and the government's disbandment of the Special Prosecutor's Office responsible for pursuing all those responsible for the crime. Despite the hitmen and intermediaries receiving lengthy prison sentences, a businessman associated with Fico's party, Marian Kočner, accused of masterminding the crime after threatening the journalist, was twice found not guilty. No one has yet been held responsible for ordering the killing.

Government officials and politicians regularly insult and intimidate journalists. Prime Minister Robert Fico has [referred](#) to journalists as “bloodthirsty bastards” and accused them of “being possessed by the devil”. He also [implied](#) that the “anti-government media” were partly responsible for creating an atmosphere which enabled the attempt on his life in 2024. Other politicians, including Andrej Danko, Deputy Speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic and chairman of the coalition SNS party have [accused](#) independent media of disseminating disinformation and inciting violence and social unrest. Together they equate critical reporting with a threat to national stability.

In 2024, the Mapping Media Freedom platform recorded a total of 50 [press freedom violations](#) targeting 66 media-related persons or entities.

MapMF recorded six cases of [gender-based verbal attacks](#) on women journalists in Slovakia. In February 2024, Ľuboš Blaha, Deputy Speaker of Parliament, [targeted journalist](#) Zuzana Kovačič Hanzelová online with personal insults, accusations of bias, and fabricated rumours about her sex life. Afterwards, far-right conspiracist Daniel Bombic, or ‘Danny Kollár’, posted Kovačič Hanzelová’s [phone number](#) on his Telegram channel. In June, Bombic [again targeted](#) Slovak women journalists on social media with vile, sexist insults.

Bombic’s Telegram channel spreads far-right disinformation and Covid-19 conspiracies, and doxxes journalists, particularly targeting women journalists. Backed by right-wing Slovak politicians, his channel is the most popular Slovak-language account on the platform. Living in London, Bombic is subject to an extradition request from Slovakia to face criminal charges for extremism.

During the mission, journalists also described how the hostile political atmosphere and targeted campaigns has led to distressing encounters with members of the public. One journalist explained that due to the harassment campaigns, she no longer feels safe using public transport.

Particularly disturbing is the [use](#) of a deepfake video of Monika Todova, a well-known journalist from Denník N, in which she allegedly conspires with the leader of the Progressive Slovakia party, Michal Simeka, to undermine the 2023 election due to take place two days later. It is believed to be one of the first examples in the EU of AI being used to impersonate a journalist. The case has still not been investigated and properly addressed.

During the mission, multiple stakeholders told us that while threats against politicians are being addressed, cases of harassment of journalists remain largely uninvestigated.

Regional media outlets are particularly vulnerable to attacks from government officials and online campaigns.

Surveillance is another [pressing concern](#). Journalists told the mission that they are under constant threat of being monitored. They have good reason to worry. The corruption investigations after the defeat of the last SMER government in 2020 revealed that up to 30 journalists had been illegally surveilled, including Jan Kuciak, by a covert group of police officers following instructions from Marian Kočner, the lead suspect in the double murder. [News](#) that Slovakia's intelligence agency, which lacks independent oversight, may have also acquired Pegasus spyware has increased the anxiety and risks facing journalists' and their sources.

The EMFA introduces new rules to tighten the oversight of surveillance and stop the illegal use of spyware against journalists which provide some limited safeguards. However, the rules will have to be robustly defended by the judiciary to prevent the authorities from attempting to use national security grounds to justify the surveillance of their critics in the media. The Hungarian 'Pegasus' surveillance scandal resulted in a parliamentary enquiry which completely exonerated their intelligence agencies who had infected the phones of investigative journalists on alleged national security grounds.

Finally, in September 2024, the Investigative Centre for Jan Kuciak (ICJK) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) suspended their participation with the Platform for the Promotion of Press Freedom and the Protection of Journalists after [changes to the body's composition](#). The Platform was established in October 2023 as an advisory body to oversee Slovakia's compliance with national and international press freedom commitments. However, the government replaced the 'civil society' representative, a respected journalist Zuzana Petková, with Dominik Papala, a radio host with an outlet [repeatedly](#) criticised for its lack of journalistic ethics and fined by the media regulator for violating the law. The decision was seen as an act of bad faith to undermine the Platform's work leading to the protest.

The compounded threats, including harassment, a lack of institutional support, hostile rhetoric, and impunity, as well as surveillance, create a chilling effect on journalism in Slovakia.



The MFRR mission met with representatives of Denník N and Napunk. From left to right: Barbora Bukovská (Article 19), Monika Tódová (Denník N), Veronika Munk (Denník N), Matúš Kostolný (Denník N).
Credits: Ronja Koskinen/IPI

STATE-LED DISINFORMATION AND SMEAR CAMPAIGNS

During the mission, the MFRR partners also heard with concern that the Slovak government actively engages in spreading disinformation and targeting the media with false narratives. According to stakeholders, the government's disinformation efforts have extended to various topics, including climate change, immigration, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the electoral process.

Social media platforms have become a battleground for disinformation. Government-aligned accounts frequently share manipulated images and out-of-context video clips to discredit journalists and opposition figures. The government has specifically targeted media outlets with disinformation and smear campaigns, accusing leading independent media such as Denník N, and Aktuality.sk of serving foreign interests.

Government officials have smeared journalists investigating government spending. In one instance, Juraj Gedra, head of the Government Office, [targeted](#) investigative journalist Xénia Makarová and used a selectively edited video to cast doubt on her credibility and the investigation's findings. This video was then amplified through paid advertising on social media platforms, further fueling attacks against the journalist.

The current administration openly shuns independent media, often refusing to grant interviews or participate in debates on major television networks. This exclusion of independent journalists from press conferences and denial of interviews further erodes the media's ability to provide accurate information to the public.

LEGAL THREATS

During the mission, particular focus was given to recent legislative initiatives and other legal actions that pose a significant risk to editorial independence, transparency, and legal certainty for journalists and media entities. Such legislative changes, which are not in compliance with European standards, are contributing to the deterioration of media freedom in Slovakia.

The proposed Right to Reply Law, the Law on NGOs, and the Freedom of Information Law, as well as the approach toward the public broadcaster, signal a broader shift toward increased government control over media and civil society, with potential repercussions for democratic accountability and the rights of Slovak citizens to free, independent, and reliable information. Moreover, the continued threat of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) further exacerbate the challenges facing journalists, with the potential for a chilling effect on investigative reporting and public discourse.

Right to reply: On October 30, 2024, the Slovak government approved a proposal from the Slovak National Party (SNS), to expand the right to reply in the Publication Act. If passed, it would require media outlets, when challenged, to alter allegedly untrue or incomplete statements "that impugn [the applicant's] honor, dignity, or good reputation." Individuals can submit correction requests to publishers who decide whether to accept or reject the request. If the request is not accepted, the individual may take the case to court.

The fine for non-compliance could be up to €15,000 for failure to publish corrections, which could put pressure on media to publish unfounded "correction" claims.

The proposal is highly problematic due to its vague language, which could allow for arbitrary interpretation and some commentators fear it would lead to content dictated by politicians. Arbitrary fines could also threaten the existence of smaller media outlets.

As of February 2025, the proposed changes have not been adopted by the Slovak Parliament. Media experts and international press freedom groups have argued that, if adopted, the legislation would enable government-backed harassment of journalists, undermine press freedom, and potentially conflict with the EMFA.

Press Courts: the government coalition has also been examining the creation of specialized "press courts" to handle media-related lawsuits more efficiently. These courts would focus solely on media related cases, including the new right to reply. The plan includes judges specialized on press-related disputes. Local stakeholders expressed concerns that these measures could be used to further intimidate journalists and stifle press freedom.

Changes to the NGO law regarding foreign funding: the Slovak government has proposed changes to the law on non-governmental organizations which would allow the labeling of organizations receiving more than €5,000 a year in foreign funding as "foreign supported"—a proposal that has been described as a "foreign agent law." In November, the Slovak National Party (SNS) proposed a new [amendment](#) to the law under which NGOs would be classified as lobbyists instead of "foreign-supported" groups. If passed, NGOs would be required to register and disclose their lobbying activities, including financial details and the identities of donors. Non-compliance could result in fines of up to €10,000 or even the dissolution of offending organizations by court order.

The proposal has been widely condemned with examples of how such 'foreign agent laws' can create a serious obstacle for civil society and media organizations with a high risk that the rules will be abused to create a chilling effect that deters public accountability.

The European Union has [responded](#) by stating that it will immediately launch an infringement procedure for



Representatives of Aktuality.sk met with the MFRR partners. From left to right: Teona Sekhniashvili (IPI), Flutura Kusari (ECPMF), Scott Griffen (IPI), Peter Hanak (Aktuality), Martin Sliz (Aktuality), Maja Sever (EFJ), Barbora Bukovská (Article 19), Lucie Sýkorová (ECPMF). Credits: Ronja Koskinen/IPI

violation of EU law if Slovakia follows Hungary's example on this matter. During the meetings, the mission was informed that some members of Parliament are considering amendments to these proposals.

The Freedom of Information Law was also amended by the Parliament to extend the deadline for providing responses to 12 days instead of 8 days and to introduce fees for access to information requests. While these changes may appear fairly minimal, in practice they present additional new hurdles to the right to access information. Information is often needed on a timely basis and fees can present a barrier by some media to access information in the public interest. This is even more concerning after being informed during the mission that transparency of public authorities is decreasing, with politicians often ignoring questions from certain journalists from critical media outlets, or responding to FOI requests in a way that avoids providing meaningful information.

A more general concern is that legislation in Slovakia is being introduced by the government and the Parliament through fast-track procedures that circumvent scrutiny by the media and the public. It is a basic European standard that those affected by new legislation, such as the media sector in this case, should be properly consulted during the legislative process.

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) have also been raised as an issue by local stakeholders, with a recent lawsuit involving Prime Minister Robert Fico illustrating how journalists are being targeted in various ways. In September 2024, Prime Minister Fico [filed](#) a lawsuit against the editor-in-chief of Aktuality.sk, Peter Bardy, and the publisher, Ringier Slovak Media, objecting to the use of Fico's photo on the cover of the book 'Fico-obsessed with power'. We consider this lawsuit a SLAPP intended to intimidate journalists. We express our solidarity with Bardy and hope that the lawsuit will be addressed in line with the Council of Europe's recommendations on SLAPPs, with the case ultimately being dismissed.

We call on Slovak authorities to adhere to existing Council of Europe, European Court of Human Rights and European Union standards on media freedom and to begin the transposition and implementation of European directives and regulations, including the European Media Freedom Act, the Anti-SLAPP Directive, and the Council of Europe Recommendation on SLAPPs.

MISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

Public media

- The influence of the Ministry of Culture and Parliament over the STVR Council should be reduced and the composition of members diversified and depoliticised. This can be done by reforming the nomination process including:
 - Involving other democratic institutions, such as the President of Slovakia in the nomination process,
 - Introducing staggered terms for council members,
 - Involving organisations representing journalists, or civil society in the process,
 - Strengthening rules on conflicts of interest so that individuals with political connections and government employees are prohibited from serving on the STVR Council.
- The STVR funding mechanism should include direct payments from the public to reduce the financial dependence on political decisions.

Media regulator

- The proposal to establish a Presidential style media regulator with all the decision power invested in one individual should be immediately withdrawn so that all key decisions are made by the board, preferably with a supermajority.
- The appointment process for the media regulator's board should also be reformed to ensure its political independence by including similar measures noted above for the STVR Council.

State Advertising

- The government must end threats to withdraw state advertising to critical media and guarantee the fair distribution of state funded advertising.
- The rules set out in the EMFA on ensuring the transparent and objective distribution of state advertising, should be implemented in full and extended to include all local governments regardless of size of population

Media pluralism

- The EMFA rules guaranteeing editorial independence and media pluralism of media service providers should be fully implemented. Independent media should not be subjected to any undue economic, regulatory or political pressure.
- Media owners must ensure editorial independence of their newsrooms and guarantee that editorial decisions are taken independent of the political or economic interests of the owner.

Self-regulation

- Publishers should join forces to join and strengthen the self regulatory system in Slovakia to improve standards and protect editorial freedoms.

Safety of journalists

- All those responsible for the killing of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and Martina Kusnirová in 2018 must be held accountable.
- Cases of online harassment campaigns against journalists, including dissemination of deep fakes, should be duly investigated.

- Public officials must put an end to smear campaigns against independent and government-critical media.
- The government must recommit to ensure the safety and rights of Slovak journalists including supporting the independence and effective functioning of the Platform for the Promotion of Press Freedom and the Protection of Journalists.

Legal Threats

- The government should end efforts to adopt the right of reply and to introduce a form of ‘foreign agents law’ for NGOs.
- It should improve the effectiveness of Freedom of Information processes and end the discriminatory practices against journalists from independent media.
- It should fully transpose the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive as well as the Council of Europe’s Recommendations on SLAPPs, to enable the swift dismissal of abusive lawsuits that misuse the judicial system to intimidate journalists.
- The Prime Minister should set an example by withdrawing his lawsuit against Peter Bardy and Ringier Slovak Media.

We call on the European Commission to monitor the evolving situation closely to ensure that Slovakia meets its obligations under European law and in particular meet the standards set out in the European Media Freedom Act and the Anti-SLAPP Directive.





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