

Defending Democracy and Media Freedom

European Broadcasting Union (EBU)

The state of the world's democracies is deteriorating. In my 40 years as a journalist, I have never been as concerned as I am today, writes Cilla Benkö, Vice President of the EBU and Director General of Sveriges Radio, calling for a broader debate in defence of democracy and media freedom.

We are living in a challenging time. The condition of global democracy has not been this poor in nearly 50 years. Across country after country, authoritarian leaders are gaining ground. Democracy is being pushed back, and freedom of expression can no longer be taken for granted in many places. The erosion often begins with restrictions on media freedom.

A few weeks ago, the [V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg presented its annual report](#) mapping the state of democracy worldwide. Its findings should have sparked outrage far beyond the usual circles of concern. It has not looked this bad since 1978. In just one year, freedom of expression declined in 44 countries. Researchers in Gothenburg and their colleagues around the world are clear: the clock is being turned back at an alarming pace - even in Europe. Seven EU countries are undergoing autocratization. Yet there were no major headlines, no sustained public debate. Gradually, we are witnessing the normalization of changes that would once have been unthinkable.

I have worked as a journalist in Sweden for four decades and spent much of that time within the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). Never before have I felt such deep concern. I regularly meet colleagues from across Europe and hear their accounts: politicians seeking to interfere in editorial work, publicly mocking journalists, threatening to withdraw funding unless coverage aligns with their preferred narrative. I hear of new regulations designed to make it easier to remove media executives who refuse to fall in line. The list goes on.

Attacks on the media are a central component of the infrastructure of autocratization - both in Europe and globally. They often come early, as countries begin to drift away from liberal democracy. Media freedom is curtailed through direct attacks, through the use of political platforms, or by exerting influence over regulatory bodies. Developments in the United States deserve particular attention. President Donald Trump's repeated and aggressive attacks on journalists and media institutions stand out as deeply troubling. Commercial media face threats of heavy fines and revoked licenses. Public service media are stripped of funding. Journalists are ridiculed and harassed by the highest office in the land. As the V-Dem report concludes: "The speed with which American democracy is currently dismantled is unprecedented in modern history."

After decades in journalism, I have never been more convinced of the importance of independent and free media. A pluralistic and robust media landscape - where strong public service media coexist with thriving commercial outlets - reduces vulnerability to demagoguery. It strengthens accountability and makes it easier to hold those in power to account.

The moment we, as citizens, stop sharing a common understanding of reality, meaningful public conversation becomes increasingly difficult. With parallel realities, truth becomes relative. It matters whether we believe it was Vladimir Putin or Volodymyr Zelensky who started the war in Ukraine, to take one example. By attacking independent media and tightening control over the flow of information, politicians seeking power can more easily shape - and dominate - the narrative.

We must also recognize that we are living in an era where producing false information has never been easier. State actors deliberately spread disinformation to sow division, undermine trust in institutions, and weaken societal resilience. Here, too, the presence of independent media with broad reach and strong credibility is essential. Without trusted sources that citizens rely on, society becomes more vulnerable in times of crisis. The war in Ukraine - and the extensive resources Russia devotes to distorting facts, spreading falsehoods, and eroding resistance - offers a stark illustration.

History is clear: democracy is never guaranteed. It clearly shows the figures reflecting global development - and ignoring it would be a grave mistake. To me, one of the most vital safeguards of democracy is the presence of free and independent media. We all share a responsibility to protect and defend those who are increasingly under attack. This is a struggle that must be fought every single day.

Cilla Benkö
Director-General, Sveriges Radio
Vice President, EBU

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FACTS: V-Dem Democracy Report 2026

- Global democracy has regressed to 1978 levels
- 92 autocracies and 87 democracies worldwide
- 74% of the world's population (approx. 6 billion people) live in autocracies
- Only 7% live in liberal democracies
- Democracy in Western Europe and North America is at its lowest level in over 50 years
- The United States has lost its status as a liberal democracy for the first time in more than half a century