

# MELONI'S ITALY PUTS MEDIA FREEDOM IN THE BACK SEAT

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TEPSA COMMENTARY  
12/2025



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Co-funded by  
the European Union

When investigative journalist Sigfrido Ranucci's car was blown up in front of his house in Pomezia (Rome) on 16 October 2025, defenders of press freedom across Europe could not help but feel a chilling sense of déjà-vu. Exactly eight years earlier, the Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia was killed by a car bomb in her hometown, having been targeted for reporting work on high-level corruption and organised crime.

Official responses to the attack rang with unison condemnation. Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni promptly [declared](#) her "full solidarity" to the journalist, calling media freedom and independence "essential values of our democracies, which we will continue to defend". While her words were heartening, [previous interactions](#) between the journalist, who heads an influential investigative news programme on the public broadcasting service RAI, and Meloni's government had mostly amounted to public criticism, [parliamentary questioning](#), and defamation lawsuits.

The attacks against Ranucci take place in the context of growing deterioration of Italy's democratic health, and insecurity for journalists across Europe. The [2025 V-Dem Democracy Report](#) flags a "concerning decline" in Italy's ratings within its liberal democracy index, noting a risk of sliding into autocratisation. The [2025 CIVICUS Monitor](#)'s rating of civic space for Italy was downgraded from "narrowed" to "obstructed" in 2025.

Specifically in terms of press freedom, Reporters Sans Frontières' 2025 [World Press Freedom Index](#) shows that Italy performs poorly – this year's position fell from 45 to 49 out of 180 – especially when compared to other Western European countries, which rank in the

top 30. The 2025 Media Pluralism Monitor by the European University Institute [increased](#) the country's risk level to "Medium-high", stating that "critical issues persist and show no indication of improvement". In 2025 alone, the [Mapping Media Freedom initiative](#) identified 106 incidents involving press and media freedom violations across the country. Flagged events include instances of verbal abuse and public discrediting of journalists by the likes of mayors, ministers and members of parliament, threats and filing of defamation lawsuits, and blocking of distribution of journalistic content by authorities. Not all of these incidents directly involved public authorities; however, they occurred at a time where attacks against reporters and the journalistic profession have become commonplace at the highest levels of government.

## An unfit legal framework

The Italian legal framework presents shortcomings that undercut the country's constitutional commitment to protecting freedom of expression. The government coalition has discussed and adopted legislation restricting this freedom, while at the same time neglecting to implement European Union (EU) legislation on media freedom and on Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), a vexatious litigation meant to discourage public interest action by draining litigants' resources.

In early 2025, a [controversial security bill](#), which included provisions aimed at expanding intelligence services' powers to request confidential journalistic information from public bodies, was advanced under the auspices of the governing coalition. Though these amendments were later struck from the bill, the measures were harshly criticised by national media practitioners as violations of the European Media Freedom Act. Later on, Parliament [adopted](#) the so-called 'gag law',

prohibiting the publication of quotes from pre-trial orders before the end of preliminary hearings. The decree represents a significant obstacle to journalistic work, as it limits reporting on ongoing legal proceedings. At the same time, in 2024, the [Nordio Bill](#) was adopted, which hindered access to information of public interest, such as wiretapping records.

When it comes to SLAPPs, Italy lacks a comprehensive legal framework. Defamation lawsuits are a frequent tool of intimidation against journalists, who are threatened both after and *before* publication. In its [most recent yearly report](#), the Coalition against SLAPPs in Europe indicated Italy as the monitored country with the highest number of this type of lawsuit. While the Constitutional Court has called for legislative reform to “effectively balance freedom of expression and the protection of reputation”, including by reconsidering the imposition of prison sentences on journalists for defamation, parliamentary work on the matter has been slow and inconsistent. The EU anti-SLAPP Directive has not been included in the 2025 law transposing EU directives into domestic law, and it is still unclear whether Italy will respect the May 2026 transposition deadline.

Regulations surrounding RAI have also been criticised as a factor in the deterioration of media freedom in the country. While the service is public and formally independent, the legislation governing it offers significant loopholes that have allowed it to become heavily politicised. Nominations for top jobs are assigned by government and parliamentary majorities to steer the editorial line in a government-friendly direction. Political interference in RAI under Meloni has been particularly aggressive, including changes to programming, censorship, and suspension or dismissal of critical journalists. Members of the ruling coalition have boycotted RAI's Parliamentary oversight committee since Autumn 2024 due to disagreements on nominations, leaving the public broadcaster

without parliamentary oversight for more than one year. Reporters Sans Frontières has [likened](#) these approaches to the public media takeover observed in Hungary and Slovakia.

## A frosty political climate

In addition to these legal challenges, the climate surrounding journalism in political spheres has also grown increasingly bleak. Public statements and actions reacting to ‘critical’ media coverage have ranged from flippant to hostile.

The Prime Minister's own track record in this sense exemplifies this stance. Meloni has become notorious for her refusal to speak to reporters (at the time of writing, she has not engaged in an open press conference in over 330 days), unless they agree to comply with her strict editorial demands. RAI journalists have shared that they have been barred from asking the Prime Minister questions on sensitive topics during television appearances. Journalists at the *Sole 24 Ore*, Italy's main economic newspaper, [organised](#) six days of strikes in protest against the publication of a rare print interview with Meloni, which they deemed overly deferential and ‘softball’. In several instances, Meloni and her staff have had [tense exchanges](#) with the press, including allegations of national reporters wanting to “humiliate” the government during foreign visits (which have led to the intentional exclusion of Italian journalists from press conferences, or a refusal to hold them at all). She has dismissed critical coverage of her government as “fake news”, and ministers and politicians aligned with her have followed suit.

What's more, members of the Italian press have been subject to spyware attacks. Several high-profile journalists critical of the Meloni government were [targeted](#) in operations using ‘Graphite’ software developed by the Israeli firm Paragon Solutions, which the Italian

Parliament have previously [admitted](#) to using to track activists. While collaborations between the Italian government and Paragon were [terminated](#), officials have remained largely silent on the case. The lack of conclusive indications of responsibility for these breaches has created a further climate of fear and insecurity among media professionals.

The message is clear: critical journalism in the age of Meloni comes with negative practical, reputational, economic and legal repercussions. The result, in many cases, has been overzealous self-censorship by media outlets scrambling to preserve their access to the government.

## Weak responses from the EU

The EU's responses to the deterioration of media freedom in Italy have been slow, partial and marred by political interference. The European Commission's 2025 Rule of Law Report [recognises](#) the need to implement reforms that enhance press freedom and protect journalists, but [fails](#) to comprehensively address the issues facing journalists and the government's active involvement in undermining media freedom. Commission representatives have claimed to be "[closely monitoring](#)" the Italian situation, but no tangible action has been taken on this matter so far.

Meloni has refused to engage seriously with EU concerns on the issue. She has [disputed](#) findings contained in the Rule of Law Report and [refused to engage seriously](#) in European Parliament (EP) hearings on the topic. In November 2025, news outlets reported that the European People's Party allied with Meloni's European Conservatives and Reformists and other far-right groups in the EP to [block](#) a planned visit by the Rule of Law Monitoring Group of the EP's Civil Liberties Committee. While opposition Members of the EP have declared their intention to repropose the

mission, it is unclear whether they will be able to mobilise a majority to this end.

Leading civil society organisations and scholars of media freedom are ringing alarm bells over the situation in Italy, but the EU appears largely unconcerned. Wrestling with the fallout from severe democratic backsliding in the likes of Hungary and Slovakia, policy-makers in Brussels may be too overwhelmed to recognise the unravelling of a familiar playbook. This passivity risks turning Italy into yet another test case of how far democratic erosion can proceed within the Union before red lines are drawn. The EU must act forcefully in response to these threats by enforcing applicable EU law, setting up non-politicised monitoring mechanisms, and conducting thorough investigations into allegations of violations of media freedom. The alternative does not only mean abandoning Italy's journalists, but sending a message across the Union – where regression in this regard has become increasingly common – that EU standards are nothing but optional.

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