

## Freedom of Expression and Digital Rights in Turkey

By Batıkan Erkoç

Media and Law Studies Association (MLSA) is a non-profit organization based in Istanbul, dedicated to promoting freedom of expression and press freedom. We provide pro bono legal support for journalists and operate Turkey's largest trial monitoring program focused on freedom of expression cases.

Despite Turkey's upcoming Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a national consultation did not take place. We are part of a coalition with the Small Media Foundation, based in the United Kingdom.

My statement will address three key themes:

1. **Freedom of Expression in Turkey**
2. **Press Freedom and Journalist Safety**
3. **Digital Rights and Internet Freedom**

---

### Freedom of Expression in Turkey

During its last UPR in January 2020, Turkey received 47 recommendations aimed at improving freedom of expression and press freedom. While Turkey supported most of these recommendations, it has failed to make progress and, in fact, has significantly regressed in these areas.

According to our 2024 Trial Monitoring Report, which exclusively monitors freedom of expression cases, MLSA observed more than 600 hearings involving over 1,800 individuals prosecuted for exercising their right to free expression. In total, defendants received over 233 years in prison sentences.

During the review period, the Turkish government enacted so called **Disinformation Law**, which criminalizes the dissemination of "untrue information to the public" without defining what qualifies as "untrue." in 2022. This vague law has been used to target journalists and social media users who challenge the government's narrative.

Following the 2023 earthquake, the government heavily used the law against individuals criticizing its response efforts. As of 2025, more than 60 journalists have been investigated, and at least 10 have been arrested under this charge. Official government figures indicate that over 6,000 investigations have been launched since the law's adoption.

Another tool of repression is Turkey's **anti-terrorism legislation**, which has an overly broad definition of terrorism, severely restricting freedom of expression. During the last UPR, six countries specifically recommended that Turkey amend its anti-terror laws in

line with international standards. Turkey has failed to act, and the law continues to be used to silence government critics. In 2024 alone, at least 120 journalists were prosecuted for “membership in a terrorist organization” based largely on their reporting, while 56 others faced charges of “propaganda for a terrorist organization.”

---

## Press Freedom and Journalist’s Safety

Turkey remains one of the world’s top ten jailers of journalists. Currently, 32 journalists are behind bars, with four under house arrest. Judicial independence has significantly declined since the post-2016 purges, with the President exerting full control over judicial bodies.

MLSA’s 2024 Trial Monitoring Report found that 366 journalists faced trial for their journalistic activities, with most charged under anti-terror laws or for defamation and insult.

Turkey has also failed to establish effective mechanisms to protect journalists. The case of **Hrant Dink**, a journalist murdered in 2007, remains unresolved, with hearings still ongoing in Istanbul. Additionally, our research shows that over 80% of interviewed journalists fear physical attacks by law enforcement.

---

## Digital Rights and Internet Freedom

Turkey’s **2020 social media law** increased government pressure on digital platforms. The government frequently imposes **access bans and bandwidth restrictions** to suppress public discourse, particularly during national emergencies. A striking example occurred in the aftermath of the **2023 earthquake**, when the government restricted access to Twitter, severely hampering rescue efforts.

Currently, Turkey is proposing a **Cybersecurity Law** that would grant a presidential appointee the authority to **search private homes and digital devices**. The law also seeks to criminalize reporting on **data leaks and cybersecurity issues**, with penalties of up to five years in prison.

Furthermore, in 2023 alone, Turkey banned **14,680 news articles** and **5,641 social media posts**, according to our FreeWebTurkey report. Even though the **Constitutional Court annulled** provisions allowing access bans based on “personal reputation,” courts continue to issue these bans under various legal justifications.

---

## Recommendations

1. **Repeal the Disinformation Law** and amend anti-terrorism legislation in line with Turkey’s international obligations.
2. **Ensure national courts adhere to international standards** on freedom of expression.

3. **Implement effective journalist protection mechanisms** and end arbitrary arrests.