



HONOURING THE UNWORTHY: THE ATLANTIC COUNCIL'S DANGEROUS MISSTEPS IN REWARDING FREE SPEECH OPPRESSORS

We, the undersigned civil society and journalists' organisations (CSOs) that advocate for the safeguarding and promotion of the rule of law, democracy, freedom of expression, media freedom and the protection of journalists are appalled by the decisions of the Atlantic Council to award Italian Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis [Atlantic Council Global Citizen Awards](#).

We find that these decisions risk normalising their repressive policies and actions against media freedom and can further erode democratic principles and embolden authoritarian tendencies in both countries and beyond.

According to the European Commission's [annual Rule of Law report](#) and numerous reports, including those from [ARTICLE 19](#), the [Media Freedom Rapid Response \(MFRR\)](#), [Freedom House](#) and [Liberties' Media Freedom Report](#), there has been, under the watch of Meloni, a rapid deterioration in media freedom in Italy. There has been a [marked rise](#) in strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) targeting journalists with Meloni and her party directly involved. In October 2023 for example, journalist [Roberto Saviano was convicted](#) for criminal defamation in a lawsuit Meloni brought against him and only a few weeks ago, her party, [Fratelli d'Italia filed a civil lawsuit](#) seeking EUR 30,000 damages from journalists, Giovanni Tizian and Nello Trocchia at the newspaper Domani, over an article investigating the party's donation to fascist association Acca Larenzia. These are just two of many examples with almost every member of the current government having sued a journalist. A mission report from the MFRR lists the main ones [here](#) (under 'legal threats'). In the case of public broadcasting there have been serious attempts to censor and influence the programming of the public service broadcaster RAI with the resignation of then CEO, Carlos Fuortes in May 2023 citing government pressure. Fuortes' departure contributed to the European Commissioner for the Internal Market at the time, Thierry Breton [expressing concern](#) over political interference in public media in Italy. Furthermore, the Centre for

Media Pluralism and Media Freedom's (CMPMF) [Media Pluralism Monitor](#) at the European University Institute placed Italy among the countries where the independence of public service media is most threatened ('the highest risk level').

The case in Greece is no less grave. Back in August 2022, a headline in [Politico](#) ran with "*How Greece became Europe's worst place for press freedom*" with references to a "pro-government press" dominating and increasing threats, attacks and surveillance of journalists. [The MFRR](#) notes that the country ranked as the worst for media freedom in the EU in the World Press Freedom Index, and a [report](#) by the MFRR documenting a mission to Greece following the 2023 election victory of New Democracy states that "*Media freedom in Greece has undergone a sustained decline in the last few years, amidst the broad-daylight murder of a crime reporter, multiple threats to the safety of journalists, a sprawling surveillance and spyware scandal and numerous vexatious lawsuits and legal threats against media and journalists, with detrimental consequences for Greek democracy.*"

The Atlantic Council claims to pursue the spread of freedom, democracy and the rule of law, and considers [freedom of the press](#) a vital foundation of democratic societies. However, as documented above, Prime Ministers of Italy and Greece respectively, Giorgia Meloni and Kyriakos Mitsotakis continue to seriously impede these rights.

Not only does the decision to award them the Global Citizens Awards undermine the credibility of the Atlantic Council's stated purpose and values, but it also sets a dangerous precedent that could embolden other leaders to adopt similar repressive measures against dissent and independent journalism.

We urge the Atlantic Council to reconsider its decisions and demonstrate a commitment to these fundamental values. The award selection process should be thoroughly reviewed, ensuring the selection criteria align with democratic principles and human rights.

The integrity of this previously prestigious award must reflect unwavering support for human rights and the fundamental principles that underpin free and open societies.

Signed

ARTICLE 19 Europe

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Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties)

European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF)

Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF)

European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)

Free Press Unlimited (FPU)

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