

# PROTECTION MECHANISMS IN LATIN AMERICA

How to strengthen the fragile shield  
protecting journalists

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Cover: Protests in Santiago, Chile on 14 November 2019 against measures taken by President Sebastián Piñera's government. © Martin BERNETTI / AFP

**Publication date: December 2024**

# FOREWORD

## Developing effective state policies for protecting journalists

Ensuring a safe environment for journalists continues to be a major challenge for Latin America's democracies. At least 338 journalists have been killed in the region since 2000. These deaths have been compounded by waves of harassment, arbitrary arrests and judicial persecution, which have forced journalists to flee abroad.

Due to this systemic violence, protection mechanisms are urgently needed. These state-sector programmes aim to protect individuals who are exposed to risks because of their journalistic work or because they combat corruption, organised crime, and abuses carried out by authorities. These initiatives are often launched in response to pressure from civil society and international organisations.

In the past ten years, Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, and Honduras all established such mechanisms. More recently, Ecuador and Peru launched protection initiatives in response to increased attacks. After several administrations that were hostile towards the media, Guatemala is now also trying to implement a protection policy, while draft laws are being discussed in Chile and Paraguay.

Despite national differences, these mechanisms are built around common missions: assessing risks, determining appropriate measures and implementing protection plans for those under state protection. The methods used can take various forms, ranging from regular police patrols and emergency communication channels with law enforcement to enhanced protection measures such as bodyguards, armoured vehicles, bulletproof vests, surveillance cameras, and even relocation to safer places in the most serious situations. With support from UNESCO, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has worked to strengthen these mechanisms since 2021. In 2022, RSF published a report entitled "[Protection paradigm: making protection mechanisms work for Latin American journalists](#)" on Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, and Honduras. Now, this report focuses on the initiatives emerging in Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Paraguay, and Peru.

Through this report, RSF reaffirms its commitment – together with civil society and authorities – to establishing concrete responses to the threats against journalists. The number of protection mechanisms are growing, but their efficacy varies considerably and depends on an integrated approach involving various actors in order to prevent violence and ensure that those responsible are brought to justice. Many programmes are cruelly lacking in resources and can offer only limited state support, meaning they often fail to react to threats or prosecute attackers.

RSF has therefore issued ten recommendations for creating robust and reliable protection mechanisms that guarantee press freedom and ensure that governments comply with their obligations to protect free speech and safeguard the public's right to information. Such programmes are essential not just for journalists' safety but to preserve the democratic foundation of Latin America's societies.

**Artur Romeu,**  
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# DUE TO THE DANGERS OF JOURNALISM IN LATIN AMERICA, STATES ARE IMPLEMENTING PROTECTION MECHANISMS

**33** journalists killed since 2000

GUATEMALA

10

ECUADOR

6

PERU

7

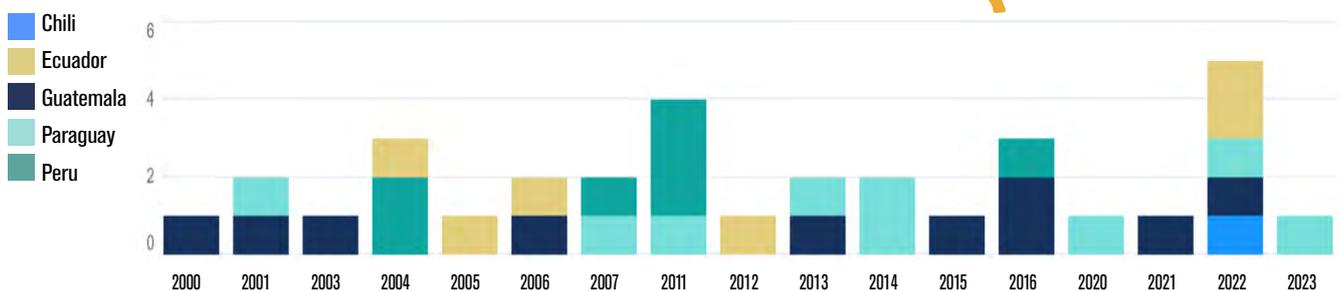
PARAGUAY

9

CHILE

1

Breakdown by country



# 1 | PROTECTING JOURNALISTS: POLICIES HAMPERED BY POLITICAL RELUCTANCE IN ECUADOR, CHILE, GUATEMALA, PARAGUAY AND PERU

In the Latin American countries examined in this report, the main challenge to strengthening policies to protect journalists is a political reluctance to make it a priority. As a result, legal frameworks are weak and resources are insufficient, as is coordination between the entities responsible. Without the required financial and institutional support, journalists are extremely vulnerable.

## | GUATEMALA: PROMISES UNFULFILLED DESPITE POST-WAR MOMENTUM



Discussions about establishing a policy to protect journalists began after 342 journalists were killed during the civil war from 1960 to 1996. At least 126 of these journalists are still missing. In 2012, the Guatemalan government pledged to the United Nations that it would establish a programme to protect journalists. Two years later, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) endorsed this commitment, but the process came to a halt after President Otto Pérez Molina resigned in 2015 amid corruption accusations. His successor, Jimmy Morales (2016–2020), showed no interest in relaunching these discussions, and the situation declined further under Alejandro Giammattei (2020–2024), when respect for press freedom declined considerably. According to the Guatemalan Journalists Association, some 400 attacks on the media were recorded during Giammattei's presidency.

When Bernardo Arévalo took office as president in January 2024, he promised to return Guatemala to a democratic path, which included a commitment to implement policies to protect journalists and human rights advocates. He proposed creating a human rights directorate within the Interior Ministry to develop protocols, coordinate protection measures with other entities, and institutionalise an early warning system in cooperation with the National Civilian Police, the Public Ministry, and the judiciary. A National Council for Prevention and for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders is also planned, which will include participation from civil society.



Photographer holds a sign with the hashtag #NoNosCallarán during a demonstration by journalists against the criminalization of *elPeriodico* staff in Guatemala City on March 4, 2023. JOHAN ORDÓÑEZ / AFP

However, ensuring that this policy is more than symbolic and truly serves as the basis for a functional protection mechanism complying with international standards continues to be a challenge. The current lack of support in Congress limits the government's ability to legislate for such a mechanism.

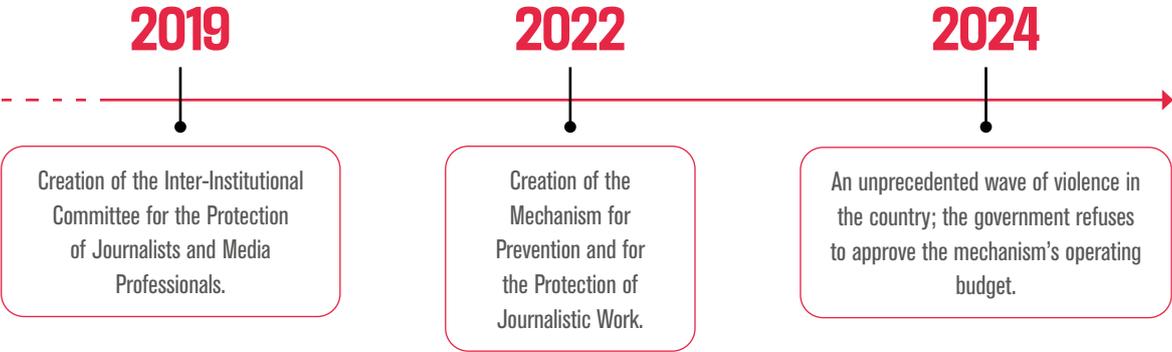
## TESTIMONIAL

*“ The situation in Guatemala is still very unstable. That’s why we are trying to push ahead with the protection policy as quickly as possible. We must take advantage of every opportunity that is offered, such as the one we have today.”*

Evelyn Blanck, a member of the team coordinating the network of NGOs Red Rompe el Miedo, which participates in the development of the protection policy.

## ECUADOR: A PROTECTION MECHANISM LACKING THE RESOURCES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

In Ecuador, the protection mechanism was initiated after three employees of the newspaper *El Comercio* – reporter **Javier Ortega**, photographer **Paúl Rivas** and driver **Efraín Segarra** – were abducted and killed by dissidents of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2018. But it was not formalised until 2023, at the end of Guillermo Lasso's presidency, following the assassination of journalist and presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio. As Ecuador's political and security crisis worsened in January 2024, President Daniel Noboa declared there was an “internal armed conflict” and imposed a state of emergency throughout the country. Today, protection measures for journalists suffer from a lack of stable resources.



The protection mechanism is supposed to function as an independent technical office, with its own staff and resources, but the lack of state funding means that journalists must turn to technical staff at the Council for the Regulation, Development and Promotion of Information and Communication. A budget request of 780,000 US dollars (about 740,000 euros) for 2024 and 2025 was denied by President Noboa, and the Council is now seeking assistance from embassies and civil society partners. Without a dedicated budget or staff, the mechanism role is limited to registering and forwarding complaints, with no guarantee that the state will take protective measures. Furthermore, various government departments – including the ministries of the interior, foreign affairs, defence, and women's and human rights – are part of the mechanism technical group but are not required to attend its scheduled sessions, which results in delays and even a failure to implement decisions.

## TESTIMONIAL

*“ The requested budget for administrative personnel, safety equipment, training and relocation assistance is very basic. Without money, we cannot monitor, map, or do anything.”*

Ricardo Rivas, President of Ecuador's Protection Mechanism

### | PERU: A MECHANISM THAT JOURNALISTS CANNOT COUNT ON



The protection mechanism sought by civil society since 2016 was only created in 2021 under pressure from a visit by a UN special rapporteur. However, this mechanism, which lacks an adequate budget, staff and binding legal framework for inter-agency cooperation, remains largely unknown to journalists and lacks credibility. Only six employees in the Ministry of Justice's human rights department have been assigned to the mechanism, and they struggle to cope with a 500% increase in cases (237 journalists requested a protection measure in 2023, compared with 40 in 2021). The budget increased by only 40% during the same period.

The 2021 decree establishing the mechanism states that its principles, measures and procedures are binding for eight ministries, but this obligation remains vague. There are no clear guidelines for allocating resources for protection measures or specific reporting structures within the justice ministry. Bureaucratic delays in determining who is responsible for funding and implementing protection measures result in deadlines being missed, both for standard cases (30 days) and urgent cases (15 days). As a result, journalists ignore this protection due to its unreliability.

Furthermore, despite the Ministry of Justice's efforts to maintain the intersectoral protection mechanism, President Dina Boluarte's administration has supported policies that run counter to it, including measures that discredit reporters who expose corruption and demand accountability for state violence. This has raised fear among journalists' organisations of new ways of criminalising the media. In 2023, the government tried to add a provision to the penal code that would allow journalists and media outlets to be prosecuted as "troublemakers" if they covered protests.



Freelance photographer Walter Hupiu and Eitan Abramovich, of AFP, are attacked by police officers while covering a demonstration against violence against women in Lima/Peru on November 24, 2006. EITAN ABRAMOVICH / AFP

## TESTIMONIAL

*“ Although we had occasion to participate in meetings where regulations were discussed, we submitted three journalists’ cases to the mechanism and they were never able to give us answers. The journalists were interviewed, but no action was ever taken. Every time there are attacks, we inform them, but we have stopped insisting. We no longer count on the mechanism.”*

Zuliana Lainez, President of The National Association of Journalists of Peru (ANP)

## PARAGUAY AND CHILE: PROTECTION POLICIES IMPLEMENTED THROUGH LEGISLATION



While Chile does not suffer the same level of structural violence as other Latin American countries, it has seen an increase in attacks on journalists, violations of the confidentiality of sources and misuse of the judicial system to silence investigative journalists. The killing of journalist **Francisca Sandoval** in 2022, the first since Chile's return to democracy, prompted serious concerns. A reporter for the community TV channel *Señal 3 La Victoria*, Sandoval was fatally shot in the head while covering May Day protests in Santiago, the country's capital.

While the bill on protecting journalists and human rights defenders received government support and was passed by the House of Representatives in March 2024, it has been stalled in the Senate ever since. Also, despite the government's commitment to a fully resourced and staffed mechanism, the current bill lacks a dedicated budget and a clear framework for the government agency responsible for protecting journalists. Most of the obligations are generically assigned to "the state," with no specific mention of a department, agency, or institution responsible. The bill also fails to address the increase in judicial harassment and online violence against journalists.

## TESTIMONIAL

*“ Today, we have no way of protecting a journalist who is threatened by drug traffickers after writing about them. This is a phenomenon that did not previously exist and requires dialogue with those who created the mechanisms in Mexico and Colombia. I am sure that, in Chile, this will be a mechanism that is coherent with reality, but we must learn about other countries' experiences.”*

Mauricio Weibel, investigative journalist



In Paraguay, the Forum for the Safety of Journalists has documented more than 600 cases since the 1990s. Most of these crimes have gone unpunished. In 2022, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled that the Paraguayan state had failed in its obligation to protect *Radio Mburucuyá* director **Santiago Leguizamón**, who was killed in 1991 after denouncing cases of smuggling and drug trafficking.

The bill to create a protection mechanism has been pending in the Senate since April 2023. It provides for an independent mechanism, coordinated between state entities, with representation from the three branches of government, the Public Defender's office, the public prosecutor's office, and civil society. A protection commission would be the mechanism's highest authority. It would include an interior ministry representative, a deputy prosecutor from the human rights crimes unit, an appeal court judge, a deputy public defender, a representative for journalists, a representative from a human rights organisation and an expert on freedom of expression, security and human rights. The bill emphasises comprehensive protection that takes account of each beneficiary's context and environment. Once adopted, the main challenges will be establishing a mechanism whose structure and composition guarantee its effectiveness, and ensuring significant civil society are represented in its operations.

However, given the conservative majority in Congress, the current political environment poses a challenge. Journalists are therefore working behind the scenes to build support and preserve key provisions of the bill.

## TESTIMONIAL

*“ There is a public consensus on the need to protect journalists. So, it's hard for a senator or deputy to say there is no justification for this law. But they can render the law useless by withholding, adding or modifying fundamental aspects.”*

Dante Leguizamón, Executive Secretary of Codehupy (Human Rights Coordination in Paraguay).

## Emblematic regional cases of violence against journalists

Journalism has become a high-risk profession in Peru, Chile, Paraguay, Ecuador, and Guatemala. Media professionals are often subjected to violence, harassment and censorship. Most of the victims work in small or midsize towns where they have been investigating community tensions and the activities of local governments.

### ECUADOR



Violence against Ecuador's media reached an alarming level in January 2024, when gunmen staged an assault on *TC Televisión* in Guayaquil during a live broadcast, an attack linked to organised crime's growing strength in the country. A journalist, **José Luis Calderón**, was taken hostage during this violent attack, as a result of which he fled the country and sought asylum in the United States.

Journalists from three Ecuadorean TV channels received envelopes containing USB sticks with hidden explosives on 20 March 2023. **Lenin Artieda**, an *Ecuavisa* anchor in Guayaquil, sustained minor injuries when he inserted one of the USB sticks into his computer and it detonated. *TC Televisión's* **Mauricio Ayora** and *Teleamazonas's* **Milton Pérez** also received envelopes containing explosives linked to threats against them.

*Ola Manta TV* reporter **Gerardo Delgado** was gunned down in his car on 10 August 2022 while on his way to cover a story between Manta and Montecristi. He was known for covering such subjects as crime, public health, and the lack of services in these communities.

At least 14 Ecuadorean journalists been forced to flee the country between 2023 and 2024.

### GUATEMALA



One of the worst cases of judicial aggression against a journalist is that of Jose Rubén Zamora, founder of the newspaper *elPeriódico*. After being jailed arbitrarily for over 800 days, he is currently under house arrest and risks losing his right to respond to trumped-up charges of money-laundering, extortion and obstructing justice.

On 2 September 2024, shots were fired at the home of **Carlos Monroy**, a correspondent for newspaper *Nuestro Diario's* in Zacapa, in an intimidation attempt linked to his work. Monroy said the gunman was reacting to the newspaper's coverage of a crime story.

In September 2024, journalists **Marvin Del Cid** and **Sonny Figueroa** from news site *VoxPopuli* were subjected to online aggression by Luis Miguel Martínez, who ran the Government Centre under former President Alejandro Giammattei. Martínez posted their personal details on social media after the publication of an investigation into government links to drug trafficking. Del Cid and Figueroa have been subjected to several acts of intimidation since 2020, including legal threats by government officials and harassment by the National Civilian Police.

### CHILE



**Francisca Sandoval** was a 29-year-old reporter working for *Señal 3 La Victoria*, a community TV channel covering societal issues and human rights in Santiago. While covering a May Day protest in the city's Barrio Meiggs district on 1 May 2022, she suffered a gunshot wound to the head when a gunman linked to local criminal groups opened fire. She died in hospital from her injury on 12 May. The presumed killer, Marcelo Naranjo, was convicted of murder.

During demonstrations on 11 September 2023, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Chile's military coup, *Mega* cameraman **Javier Barria** was shot in the face while covering protests in Santiago's Villa Francia district. The assailants who opened fire on Barria or *Mega* reporter **Rodrigo Ugarte** remain unidentified.

### PERU



**Rosa María Palacios**, a journalist working for radio, print and digital media outlets, was [the victim of multiple attacks](#) in March 2024 by far-right groups that included stigmatisation, defamation, street harassment and damage to personal property, creating a hostile work environment for the journalist.

**Liubomir Fernández**, a reporter for several digital and print media outlets, has received threats, been harassed online, and his family has been spied on. As a result of the threats, which began in February 2024, he asked the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to formally request protective measures on his behalf.

**Gustavo Gorriti**, a well-known journalist who runs the independent investigative news site *IDL-Reporteros*, has been under investigation for alleged judicial corruption since March 2024. In October, the Supreme Court ordered the website to hand over audio files from 2018 related to the alleged corruption and ordered Gorriti to reveal his sources. His staff, meanwhile, is being subjected to constant harassment, including threats and protests by far-right groups and supporters of former President Alberto Fujimori.

### PARAGUAY



Reporter **Humberto Coronel** was slain by gunmen as he left *Radio Amambay* in the city of Pedro Juan Caballero on 6 September 2022. Coronel covered corruption and organised crime, and had received death threats three months earlier but had refused police protection.

Reporter **Elias Cabral** received serious threats via WhatsApp messages on 3 September 2024. These threats were made after he posted sensitive information about local corruption issues.

# 2 | IMPACTFUL STATE POLICIES: TEN KEY REQUIREMENTS FOR AN EFFECTIVE MECHANISM TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS

Developing policies to protect journalists is a complex process that must take each country's environment into account. As a result of having monitored protection mechanisms in Latin America for several years, RSF has been able to identify ten areas for improvement that are vital for creating effective state policies and supporting civil society efforts. In conjunction with the publication of this report, RSF calls on the relevant authorities to take concrete, immediate action to strengthen the effectiveness of national mechanisms for protecting journalists. By sharing its diagnosis and recommendations, RSF reaffirms its commitment to contributing to journalists' safety and strengthening protection initiatives worldwide.

## 1/A ROBUST JUDICIAL FRAMEWORK

Journalists' safety should not depend on the goodwill of governments. Protection mechanisms should be based on legislation that establishes clear obligations for the various state entities involved, and ensures a sufficient budget for implementing the policy on a national level. Institutional independence – including from the government – should also be legally safeguarded. Governments that have created protection mechanisms without legislative provisions should work with legislators to establish a robust legal framework, involving all actors and including journalists' organisations, media outlets, and communicators.

## 2/INSTITUTIONAL COORDINATION

Any protection mechanism must coordinate with the relevant state bodies to address both systemic causes of violence against journalists and the need for justice. RSF recommends that mechanisms should receive complaints about threats directly from individuals or civil society organisations, and have the power to investigate perpetrators and refer cases to the judicial authorities for prosecution. Prosecutors must be trained in the specific nature of their role<sup>1</sup> in investigating and prosecuting crimes against journalists. Coordination of mechanisms with state entities at all levels is essential in order to guarantee that the mechanism does not operate in a vacuum, thereby ensuring comprehensive protection for journalists at risk.

## 3/AN INCLUSIVE DEFINITION OF THE TARGET GROUP

State protection should not be conditional on journalists' academic qualifications, the stories they cover or the media platforms they use. Protection mechanisms should adopt a broad definition of journalists, recognising all roles that contribute to the practice of journalism and access to news and information. Mechanisms should include reporters, media editors, bloggers, freelance journalists, cartoonists and fellow workers like drivers, who are also sometimes put in danger due to their work.

## 4/COMPREHENSIVE PROTECTION

Ensuring the physical safety of journalists is essential but does not provide enough support for journalism in high-risk areas. Psychological, social, and legal support measures are also needed, and should extend to family members, colleagues and community members. Protection measures must also mitigate the impact of security arrangements by ensuring adequate living conditions for relocated journalists and their families, including access to education and health care for children.

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1 <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375138>

## **5/SPECIFIC PROTOCOLS FOR JOURNALISTS**

The nature of journalism involves specific risks that vary from one journalist to another. Protection mechanisms must incorporate these specificities into risk assessments and protection measures, ensuring flexibility to avoid obstructing journalistic work. For example, frequent travel, the provision of police escorts at short notice, and private access to information sources must be available upon request.

## **6/DIFFERENT APPROACHES BASED ON GENDER, RACE, ETHNICITY, AND SEXUAL DIVERSITY**

Protection mechanisms should adopt different approaches that take into account gender, race, ethnicity, sexual diversity, and other factors that may increase the level of risk for the beneficiaries. The interlinked social factors that shape individual identities should also be taken into account in risk assessments and in the planning of protection measures. Such intersectional approaches can better respond to the specific needs of beneficiaries and ensure that protection is tailored to the social realities they face.

## **7/A PERMANENT, FLEXIBLE BUDGET**

Protection mechanisms require stable and flexible funding to ensure rapid protection measures, adequate staffing, and effective policy management. Urgent protection measures must be spared the usual public procurement delays so they can respond quickly to potential dangers. A flexible budget is also necessary to respond to increased protection needs that result in greater costs.

## **8/TRAINED TECHNICAL PERSONNEL**

Effective protection mechanisms require staff who are trained in human rights issues and the importance of freedom of expression and information for democracies on an ongoing basis. Caseworkers must be technically competent enough to assess the context of violence without bias. Those in charge of the mechanism should also recommend training for police, prosecutors, and judicial officials on the protocols for handling cases involving freedom of expression.

## **9/CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION**

The success of protection policies is closely linked to civil society involvement in their design and implementation. Beneficiaries must have a role in assessing their risks and designing protection measures, and the organisations that represent them must participate in risk analyses and decisions about protection. Effective participation must include spaces for consultation and decision-making, in which civil society organisations have equal voting rights. Authorities must establish channels for constant dialogue with journalists and communities in order to better diagnose risks and respond effectively.

## **10/CREDIBILITY AND ACTIVE TRANSPARENCY**

A protection mechanism is only effective if it is trusted by those it aims to protect. This requires full transparency and continued awareness-raising campaigns about its functions. The information available to the public should include the criteria used in risk assessments, request refusals, and protection plans. Regular, anonymised reports on the scope of the policy – including the number of persons protected, demographic characteristics, measures taken and annual budgets – should be made available. RSF recommends providing the national parliament with an annual report on the protection mechanism with transparent indicators so that the effectiveness of the policies can be continuously evaluated and improved.





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