

Joint statement

Press freedom, media development, and journalists' organisations call on Member States to adopt ambitious EU budget for independent journalism and recovery of the media sector

Brussels, Thursday 4 June 2020

Following the launch by the European Commission of its Recovery Plan for Europe, press freedom, media development, and journalists' organisations are joining forces to call on EU Member States to adopt an ambitious Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027, **strengthening the media sector and supporting independent journalism.**

The situation facing journalism and news media was dire even before the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In February 2020, the budget lines allocated to support news media and journalism in the MFF via the Creative Europe programme was already being described as "simply unacceptable". "With fake news on the rise and diversity under attack, we need more, not less funding for our creative minds", Sabine Verheyen, European Parliament's CULT committee chair said. Verheyen warned that the MFF proposal should not go against "what the Member States have agreed on several occasions to support culture and creative sectors."

This support is even more urgent for news media and journalism today than when this alarm was raised at the beginning of the year. Without significant increases in financial support and giving greater prioritisation to news media and journalism, the European Union (EU) is in danger of failing **to live up to its political commitments in the areas of press freedom, the rule of law, and fundamental rights in order to defend democracy** and the public's right to know.

The coming weeks will be marked by crucial negotiations between EU Member States in order to kick off the MFF 2021-2027 in due time. In this context, we are calling them on to:

- **Use Next Generation EU to ensure the survival of journalism and the media sector**

The COVID-19 crisis has aggravated the financial vulnerability of the media industry, already hit hard by previous economic crises. The updated MFF 2021-2027 proposal and the launch of the Next Generation EU instrument are strong opportunities to support the sector. Member States should make the most of the new Recovery and Resilience Facility, the Solvency Support Instrument, the strengthened InvestEU proposal, Horizon2020, and other investments tools, to **channel urgent and targeted support** for news media and journalism, especially local, health, and investigative reporting, to already underserved communities, **including small and medium-sized media outlets.**

In this process, the European Commission and Member States must ensure, in accordance with Council of Europe recommendations, that "any direct or indirect subsidies or other forms of financial support should be granted on the basis of objective, equitable and viewpoint-neutral criteria, within the framework of non-discriminatory and transparent procedures, and [...] implemented in full respect of the editorial and operational autonomy of the media beneficiaries."

- **Condition the allocation and payments of EU funds to the respect of the rule of law**

The 2018 European Commission proposal to suspend or limit the allocation of EU structural funds in case of generalised deficiencies as regards the rule of law in a Member State is an important step forward to enshrine the EU fundamental values of democracy, freedom, and respect for human rights. At a time where the Article 7 procedure has shown its limits, the rule of law conditionality will be strong leverage to put pressure on EU Member States, address the worrying state of media freedom and pluralism in the EU, and strengthen the EU Rule of Law Mechanism.

We are calling on EU Member States to **adopt the rule of law conditionality regulation as soon as possible**, in order to ensure its implementation from 1 January 2021. In addition, the proposal of the European Parliament to include in the list of risks characterising general deficiencies as regards the rule of law **“systemic violation of fundamental rights”** should be considered in the final negotiations.

- **Double the proposed budget for Creative Europe, in order to sustain independence of the media sector**

Media capture, ownership concentration, state interference, selective advertising revenues, and dependency over online platforms have negatively impacted for many years the editorial independence and working conditions of journalists. At a time when independent journalism and access to pluralistic information are unconditionally critical, **recovery measures should not be solely limited to the consequences of the pandemic.**

The Creative Europe 2021-2027 programme, and in particular, its media and cross-sectoral strands, will be a crucial instrument to promote skills and innovative business models, leading to an independent and viable media sector. The May 2020 updated MFF proposal of the European Commission, even further decreasing the Creative Europe budget from 1.642 billion to 1.520 billion EUR (commitments, 2018 prices), does not send the right signal to trigger adequate EU support to journalists and media professionals.

We therefore strongly **support the position of the European Parliament to strengthen the budget allocated to the Creative Europe 2021-2027 budget to 2806 billion EUR (constant prices)**, and to significantly increase the portion dedicated to the cross-sectoral strand that originally envisaged only 62 million EUR for support to media pluralism, quality journalism and media literacy. To have a meaningful impact on supporting journalism, especially non-profit, investigative, and local outlets, **the cross-sectoral strand of the budget should be increased tenfold.**

- **Strengthen the Justice and Rights & Values programmes to protect journalists**

Everyday, we witness cases of censorship, intimidation, online and offline harassment, strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), as well as physical and gender-based violence against journalists, including in EU Member States. These trends are on the rise, and aggravated by the COVID-19 crisis. Protection of journalists is a democratic matter, and legislation and policy actions taken by the EU for their safety should be backed up by adequate financial resources through the future Justice and Rights & Values 2021-2027 programmes.

We are calling on EU Member States to align their position with the first reading reports of the European Parliament, and **increase the budget of the Justice and Rights & Values 2021-2027 programmes** compared to the initial European Commission proposals.

- **Channel increased support to the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) to democracy, human rights and rule of law priorities**

The EU external action to support freedom of expression and media pluralism, as well as the flexibility allowed by the EIDHR, have proven to be key to promote freedom of expression and sustain professional, free, and independent media. This support will even be more needed, as the disastrous consequences of

market failure, media capture, and COVID-19 crisis on independent journalism and the media sector are leaving large sectors of societies without professional information sources. As the European Commission proposed to strengthen the NDICI through an External Action Guarantee and the European Fund for Sustainable Development, **we are calling on EU Member States to ensure adequate resources are allocated to the thematic priority on human rights and democracy.**

Even though journalism support and media assistance represent a small proportion of donor portfolios, EU funding is increasingly crucial for sustaining journalism organisations and independent media around the world. This is also in line with the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, specifically Sustainable Development Goal 16.10, and respect for human rights. We call on the EU Member States to reinforce the recognition of **the importance of media and journalism for development goals including health, good governance, and democratic institutions by firmly positioning support for the sector within the NDICI mechanism, and dedicating at least 0.5% of NDICI budget to this thematic priority.**

SIGNATORIES

- ARTICLE 19
- Association of European Journalists (AEJ)
- DW Akademie
- European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF)
- European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)
- Fondation Hironnelle
- Free Press Unlimited
- Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD)
- International Media Support (IMS)
- International Press Institute (IPI)
- Internews
- Media Diversity Institute (MDI)
- Oxygen for Information (Ossigeno.info)
- Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
- World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers. (WAN-IFRA)