

INCREASE THE FREEDOM OF PRESS, TO HELP UNDERSTAND OUR RIGHTS AND SENSE OF BELONGINGS TO NEUTRAL PARTS

It's worth acknowledging how much we talk about freedom of speech and how little we do to ensure that it is not restricted. How is it possible that in developed countries, members of the European Union, we see countries having quite a subjective media? And yet, Poland, Hungary and other countries surprise us not only with their judicial decisions against individuals, such as the banning of journalist Anna Wilk in Poland from practicing her profession for three years, but also with the actions of the state as a whole aimed at exterminating their opponents.

We believe that every European country should have a free and independent media because it is a true enabler of democracy. It is important for growth, services, and reduction of poverty, as well as being an important end in itself. Without it, countries, societies, and states, ultimately fail. Encouraging an open and effective press serves to improve the environment for long-term social, political and economic stability. And by independent media, we are referring to any media, such as television, newspapers or Internet-based publications, which are free of influence by government or corporate interests.

Therefore, the issue we are tackling in this proposal is the lack of free and independent media in EU member-states, having Hungary and Poland as our case studies. This problem should not be seen as a problem of these particular states but of the EU as a whole. It is by taking over the media that the government seeks to influence its citizens through limited access to information and by the manipulation of what is presented by the media. An unconditional threat not only to the pluralism of information, but to preserving democracy in general. According to our research, conducted through a questionnaire for Polish citizens, their main source of receiving information is through television, especially when taking into consideration the elderly population. This media channel becomes the only source for receiving information not only on local events but on the international scope as well. In the meantime, the younger generation tends to get information through the Internet, which also cannot be fully reliable with so many blaring fake news headlines.

Since 2015 in Poland, we have had some reforms about public providers. After the Law and Justice party won the elections, there were changes made between the heads of public media, especially when it comes to public television, which leads to a subjective media. Ever since, the government has been violating the idea of free and independent media. The media outlets owned by the people connected to the government do not portray the reality of the country's, the EU's or the world's politics while overplaying the information as much as they want to in an attempt to control public discourse.

Reliable information should be available for each European citizen regardless of age, language, or which area - rural or urban - he or she is coming from. If citizens, at the early

stages of life, do not have enough information, they will not develop critical thinking skills but will rather believe in the propaganda presented in the media.

We believe that the media should offer free and reliable platforms for all people, and with that in mind, our proposed solutions to the problems of media independence and pluralism in the European Union act on three levels: allowing the power to control and sanction at the European level (I); acting at the national and local level (II) and proposing a new source of information with a truly pan-European media (III).

I. Allowing the power to control and sanction at the European level

If the EU wants to ensure media independence and pluralism, it must be able to sanction all abuses of these. For this, there is no need to create a new entity or yet another European Commissioner. At present, we have Ms. Margrethe Vestager, Vice-President of the Commission and Commissioner for Competition, whose duties include strengthening the enforcement of, and reviewing, EU competition rules. As a result, she has the power to sanction any monopolistic situation. We also have Mrs. Věra Jourová, Vice-President and Commissioner, who leads the Commission's work on values and transparency and respect for the rule of law. Two of her prerogatives are to: support work on countering disinformation and fake information while preserving freedom of expression, freedom of the press and media pluralism; and identify risks to plurality in the media sector and propose cross-border projects to support independent and diverse journalistic activities. With these two Commissioners, the Commission would have the power to sanction these abuses¹, as it already does in terms of unfair competition. All it needs is a solid legal basis.

We know that the EU has no competence in terms of media, but it can start by using Article 132 TFEU (proper functioning of the common market)² to draft European legislation that would prohibit any media monopoly within a single state. And, as it is easy to create subsidiaries, front companies, or to place trusted men at the head of the main media which can so easily become pro-state, it is necessary to ensure that the Commission is able to sanction these consortia.

II. Acting at national and local level

For the national and local levels, we have thought of two solutions. The first would be to make it compulsory to have a visible sign or marker on paper and digital versions of the media to make explicit the owner of the media, its affiliations or its political orientation and thus the editorial line of the newspaper. It would include a media reliability scale to indicate whether the media is reliable or notorious for spreading false information. This kind of marker would also be placed on their social media accounts as citizens are increasingly informing themselves on these platforms. With this, citizens would be informed of the media's vision and could read others with different points of view to form their own opinions in an informed way.

¹ With the changes in the Commission, the Commissioners change, the distribution of the Commissioners' portfolios change, but the prerogatives attributed to the Commission remain.

² but also art 3. 1b TFEU, art 101 a 109, Art 116, protocole N°27 and media = services art56 TFUE

The second proposal would be a citizens' initiative, but states should guarantee its authenticity and publicise it. For example, it could be to create a collaborative online platform where citizens could share the news they have consulted (checked the reliability of sources) in order to have a platform gathering a maximum of news from a wide variety of sources and of differing opinions. This would be a good advertisement for small independent media in countries where media independence and diversity are under threat³.

III. Creation of the very first pan european media

The creation of a pan-European media would not solve the problem of media independence, but it would provide a new source of information which would support media pluralism. First of all, this media should be multilingual. At the very least, it should be offered in the 24 official languages of the current EU so that every European citizen can receive information in their mother tongue. Indeed, many European citizens do not master any foreign language. At most, additional versions could be envisaged. The languages of the Western Balkans, which are destined to join the EU, could also be included. We could also include Icelandic, Norwegian, and also the members of the Eastern Partnership (Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenian)⁴. Since the EU supports diversity, one could imagine partnerships to have versions offered in regional languages. Finally, a Russian version should be offered for the minority of Russian speakers in many countries, but also to counteract the bad information vilified by Russian influential bodies such as RT and Sputnik.

Secondly, this media must be available on all European televisions without the need for any internet or satellite subscription. A radio version and a newspaper version could also be added. Then, since we are in the 21st century, we could reach younger generations with positions in various social media sources such as a YouTube channel, webradio broadcast, or podcast.

Thirdly, this media should be an opportunity for the EU citizen to see the news from a European point of view. This media would present EU actualities to raise the awareness of EU citizens but also the current conditions of all European regions to raise the sense of belonging because we face the same issues and we have the same hopes. This new information and perspective would allow European citizens to sharpen their critical thinking skills, especially when their country's current primary media sources are government-run and nationally-minded.

Finally, this media can be a brand new one or may be an improvement of the current Euronews channel, but with some important modification and improvement. As we said, its programmes should be available in every EU official languages (at a minimum)⁵. This media should be more neutral than Euronews and use at least a less partisan vocabulary, especially

³ It could also be a more formal, more institutional and more automated platform if RSS technology was used to automatically generate news from the various national media

⁴ The official languages of Switzerland and Moldova are already official languages of the EU.

⁵ One can imagine subtitles available for the hearing impaired which could also serve as a reference for European citizens wishing to improve their foreign languages, as learning European languages develops the feeling of belonging to the EU

towards leaders who do not share (all) European values. Next, this media must popularise European information and educate people so as not to leave the European subject only to experts; citizens who have no background in European issues should be able to understand it very easily. There must be political debates on this continuous news channel (or in podcasts or webradio), inviting experts of different ideologies and European politicians of different political families to show their point of view on current affairs, to debate, to be accountable and to make themselves known to their voters. Finally, this media would receive information in three ways: (1) having its own journalists on the ground; (2) including or cooperating with already existing independent media that specialise in EU news and/or news in the various European regions; and (3) all Member States must participate. All of these information-gathering solutions can be combined. With this third solution, however, the states will have to pay a small part of their national TV fees, which would ensure a collective co-management of the medium, thus avoiding any partisan bias, but above all ensuring its independence, which thereby would not be the instrument of influence of one state. States should also agree to share their information while consenting that it be treated with a neutral perspective by the media.