



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Safeguarding media freedom and pluralism

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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

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We know Europe is a home of democracy, transparency and fundamental rights; we know that a free and pluralistic media is an essential part of that.

But how to ensure respect for those values in practice is less obvious. And that's where I seek a debate with you and where I'd like your ideas. I am glad Minister Rabbitte and I are here together this morning. It shows that the Irish Presidency is as committed as we are to drive this debate with you, and find a way forward. That is no surprise, as we speak in a city that knows the value of freedom, and long struggled for it.

There are three points I'd like to make today.

First, in the EU we do face challenges: sometimes even threats to our principles. By international comparison, Europe does relatively well in this area; most EU citizens, thankfully, enjoy the benefits of a free and pluralistic media. But that does not mean there are no problems: whether of media concentration and lack of diversity; of restrictions on online and offline media; or of state control, pressure and interference.

Hungary has been one high-profile case: and there, issues of media freedom are not yet solved; only a fraction of the Council of Europe recommendations have been implemented. I welcome that Klubrádió has finally received a disputed frequency after an extremely long and complex legal battle.

But media issues are not limited to one Member State; there are concerns and intense debates in places across the EU. From concerns about excessive concentration of media ownership and lack of transparency in Bulgaria; to the UK Leveson Inquiry on the press, where the rights and responsibilities of journalists to abide by the law were tested and found severely wanting in many instances. The scale and the issues are not always the same, but this is a debate that rages across the Union.

And this is an issue we must fix in Europe. We are the birthplace of democracy; a global guardian of fundamental rights. If Europe is to be anything more than an economic union, it should be as a model and champion of those values. To safeguard them for our own citizens; and to promote them to the planet. Let's be the global best-in-class; the freest and proudest media in the world.

My second point is: how do we achieve that? Because there are many different views about the best instrument to use. Whether there should be intervention by lawmakers – or self-regulation by the sector – or something in between. Whether it should be EU or national action. Or perhaps it's not about the rules and regulations at all – but about the climate in which they operate and are interpreted, a climate of professionalism by and respect for a free media.

I want to make a contribution to resolving those issues in a dialogue with you – in a way that transcends particular cases, and transcends party politics. What is at stake is citizens' right to free expression; and the right to benefit from free expression by others. Party politics should not stand in the way of those rights. Too often politicians in Brussels seem to have pulled their punches on what is happening in one or other Member State, due to party political loyalty.

And despite the local differences across the EU, it is clear to me - especially in times of economic difficulties - you should not restrict media channels nor the information citizens can access through them, for example to improve your conditions for re-election. Neither through laws nor through a climate that induces self-censorship. Citizens need to know they can rely on unrestricted information to make good choices.

The third point is that you cannot ignore the reality of today's online world. Today we have many different systems in place. For example: national regulators, which can be controversial for print media, are commonplace for audiovisual broadcasting. Yet, in a digital age, once-clear distinctions are becoming blurred: between print and broadcast, between organised media and occasional bloggers, between professional journalist and activist citizen. Any attempt to codify and protect media freedom and pluralism struggles to contain those shifting concepts. What do we even mean by "media"? The fact is, in an online world, content readily crosses sectoral boundaries: and readily crosses national borders, too. And because the digital transition is a challenge for some traditional media, I have created the Media Futures Forum led by Christian van Thillo to discuss future-oriented solutions across the sector. I recommend reading their report.

Around 18 months ago, I asked another High Level Group of experts to consider the issue of media freedom and pluralism. I am glad Herta Däubler-Gmelin, one of the authors, is with us today. Their independent report made 30 recommendations: to the EU, its Member States, but also to media outlets and journalists themselves.

Some of those recommendations already attracted considerable attention earlier this year. Some blatantly misrepresented the report and said the EU would seek the power to "sack" journalists. That's absolutely not true. But this is a comprehensive report, raising many important and subtle ideas. Like whether legislation should be used to protect journalistic sources. Or about the role of journalistic standards. All areas where there is a genuine debate to be had. Let's drill down to that next level.

I realise this is a sensitive area. And I realise that views on these issues can be divided, even within the sector itself. But that's exactly why I want to know your views: of journalists, practitioners, experts.

Those of you who can carry out your job without interference or restriction – great. But those of you who do not feel so lucky – tell us why, and what kind of action might change that.

And so today I announce the launch of two consultations on the recommendations of the High Level Group. Starting today for 12 weeks you are asked to give input.

The first looks at one specific issue in a field where the EU has already exercised its legislative competences. National regulatory authorities oversee audio-visual services under existing EU rules; we are asking whether and how to revise the EU law that applies to them, in particular to strengthen and to better guarantee their independence from governments.

And in a second consultation we are asking for views on each of the other recommendations of the group. Whether you agree or disagree or whether you have other ideas – this is your chance to say so and help shape the future of media policy.

This question of how we safeguard fundamental freedoms like media freedom and pluralism is not an easy one to answer: but it is vitally important and it is not going to go away. As the recent letter from four EU Foreign Ministers to President Barroso showed – some governments are concerned by the threats to our common values. I call on all governments in the EU to take this debate seriously in the interest of our citizens and ultimately in their own interests.

But for all that this is a complex question, for all that opinions may be polarised, we must find the right way forward; for the sake of European values, fundamental freedoms, and the fabric of our democracy.

I will not shy away from these difficult issues. I am determined to identify that way forward, to take concrete action, if justified, before the end of my mandate. The solution may lie in action from the EU or Member States; from the sector itself; or from a mix. But whatever the answer, I am clear that freedom of speech is a fundamental EU value; and the EU has a duty to ensure it is safeguarded.

For how to best do that, I turn to the journalism profession itself, and those who cherish and protect its values.

This is a unique opportunity. And it is a call to action to all of you: I hope you will hear it and respond. I know you value media freedom, and fear its loss. So tell me not just what the problems are: tell me the solutions.

Thank you.