

GFMD Position Paper

Democracy at Risk: Why the EU Must Prioritise Media Freedom in the Next MFF

Following the adoption of the [first report outlining the European Parliament's](#) vision for the next long-term EU budget, press freedom, media development, and journalists' organisations are joining forces to call on EU Member States to adopt an ambitious and innovative Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028–2034. This framework must strengthen the public interest media sector and support independent journalism as a cornerstone of a free, democratic, strong, and secure Europe that contributes to a peaceful and just world.

As the European Parliament agreed in the [adopted compromises](#), in particular compromise 6, “*a free, independent and pluralistic media is a fundamental component of Europe's resilience, safeguarding not only the free flow of information but also a democratic mindset, critical thinking and informed decision-making.*”

Achieving this vision will require both strong political commitment and adequate resourcing through the Multiannual Financial Framework.

The strategic rationale for prioritising media funding in the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework, including the [Democracy Shield](#), and external cooperation instruments, is irrefutable.

- Supporting journalism is vital in the face of emerging threats such as disinformation and misuse of AI, which risk widening the epistemic gap, deepening inequalities, and fuelling political polarisation, tensions, and even violence within societies. Moreover, [journalism is at risk of being marginalised in the accelerated weaponisation of information](#), fuelled by powerful actors and amplified by dominant online platforms, leaving societies increasingly vulnerable to malicious influence and interference campaigns.

- Public interest journalism delivers [large financial and democratic returns](#). Investigative reporting has not only spurred hundreds of arrests of criminals and corrupt officials, policy reforms, and civil society actions, but has also led to over **€5 billion in recovered assets by EU governments**—exposing dark-money flows, political corruption, and funding of extremism that too often go unchecked.
- Journalism isn't just a guardian of freedom of expression; the news industry is a significant shareholder of the European economy. About [1.1 million people work](#) in and around the publishing sector, [generating roughly 1% of the EU's GDP](#).
- In many European countries, journalists face harassment, intimidation, and physical attacks for simply carrying out their work. The sector has also been struggling financially for a long time, impeding the continuity and sustainability of essential work. Meanwhile, media institutions face increasing capture (examples include Hungary and Slovakia) and threats to its independence through the consolidation of media ownership or political interference in Europe's public service media/broadcasters.

Independent, public-interest journalism should be recognised by policy makers as a public good essential to the quality and security of our information supply—the foundation of our democracies—yet, unlike sectors such as agriculture, transport, or social issues, it still **lacks substantial and consistent funding support**. Factoring in preparedness and resilience considerations in the EU budget programme must include the information sector, as it is part of the **critical infrastructure**.

Without significant increases in financial support and greater prioritisation of independent journalism and public interest media, the European Union is in danger of failing to live up to its values and political commitments in the areas of press freedom, the rule of law, and fundamental rights—commitments not only necessary to defend democracy and the public's right to know, but also the security and resilience of EU member states.

The coming months will be marked by crucial negotiations between EU Member States to launch the MFF 2028–2034 in a timely manner. Member States and the Commission should make full use of the Creative Europe, Single Market, Innovation and Digital budgets—including Horizon Europe—alongside External Action budgets and other investment tools to provide urgent and targeted support and acceleration for the renewed journalism and media sector. In this context, **we call on EU Member states to:**

1. Guarantee the survival of journalism and the media sector through the next MFF by significantly increasing the budget for Creative Europe and related instruments for funding journalism and media.

The next long-term EU budget and the launch of the Democracy Shield instrument represent strong opportunities to support the media sector, reinforcing a **democratic and secure Europe** capable of withstanding both internal and external threats to freedom of expression and media freedom.

[Research by the Media and Journalism Research Centre](#) found that between 2018 and 2024, 94 EU-funded journalism projects received a total of €295.1 million—an estimated €50 million annually, largely through Creative Europe and Horizon Europe programmes. Although the current MFF (2021–2027) [initially allocated just €62 million for media pluralism, quality journalism, and media literacy](#), this was later supplemented by Next Generation EU funds. Despite these estimates, there is no clear or consistent [accounting of EU spending on journalism](#).

Meanwhile, the digital advertising ecosystem is [sending billions to misinformation websites each year](#). Unsurprisingly, the [Tech sector spends more than 100 million EUR per year](#) just on lobbying in Brussels to water down the regulations, and Russia spent more than 1.2 billion EUR on media in 2021 alone. More recently, [the collapse of U.S. funding for media](#) has laid bare the financial vulnerability of independent journalism in Europe and its neighbouring regions. This has been compounded by major platforms abandoning journalism and fact-checking organisations to confront the avalanche of disinformation alone—an existential threat to many independent outlets. All of this comes on top of already failing market conditions, the loss of advertising revenue to big tech, and growing autocratic encroachment in the media sector, making it increasingly difficult for even the strongest news outlets to safeguard their editorial independence and maintain financial resilience.

The 2021–2027 Creative Europe programme—particularly its media and cross-sectoral strands—has proven insufficient to support journalism organisations or to ensure the continued existence of an independent, pluralistic, and sustainable media sector.

Furthermore, there is a significant shortage of private investment in the news sector, and the EU has not done enough to [mobilise such capital](#). As a result, little funding that exists has not translated into meaningful innovation in business models or technological advancement. [Efforts to encourage private investment in the industry have not been fully](#)

[effective](#). Unlocking this catalytic potential requires more concentrated public-private partnerships and new EU-supported mechanisms to draw in private capital.

The EU must do better if it is to remain *globally strong, democratically credible, and economically and technologically competitive*.

We therefore strongly advocate for a significant expansion of the overall Creative Europe commitment compared to the previous cycle, along with a substantial increase in the portion allocated to the cross-sectoral strand, which previously encompassed most of the funding for media pluralism, quality journalism, and media literacy. To have any meaningful impact, particularly for non-profit, investigative, and local outlets, this funding should be raised to at least EUR 150 million annually.

2. Significantly increase the External Action budget lines that support journalism, media and information literacy.

The EU must significantly increase the budget lines within its External Action instruments that support journalism, media, and information literacy. Investing in democracy beyond its borders strengthens the EU's partnerships and promotes an engaged, critical, and well-informed citizenry in neighbouring and partner countries. A cornerstone of this effort is sustained support for reliable, independent media, information integrity, and equitable access to high-quality information.

The EU has already taken important steps through regional initiatives aimed at supporting media freedom and pluralism, particularly in accession countries such as those in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership (EaP) region. Additionally, the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) has proven to be an effective, rapid-response mechanism, with roughly one-third of its funding directed towards independent media.

[The recent commitment by Commissioner Kos](#) to double funding for civil society in the European Neighbourhood is a step in the right direction. Unfortunately, it falls short in comparison to the levels of funding provided by other global actors and does not yet match the scale of the challenges posed by hostile digital environments.

Independent journalism plays a vital role not only in democratic governance but also in development and humanitarian contexts. As highlighted in [Journalism for Development \(Stiglitz, Schiffrin, and Groves, 2024\)](#), journalism is fundamental to building democratic societies, driving economic development, and ensuring public accountability.

Humanitarian actors such as the ICRC and UNHCR have developed toolkits to combat harmful information and often rely on local media to reach affected populations and communicate their missions effectively.

However, journalism support remains critically underfunded. According to [*The State of Media Development by DW Akademie*](#), over 80% of media support organisations report that current funding levels are insufficient, and only 33% believe that donors offer efficient funding mechanisms. 70% highlight the lack of rapid coordination during crises, underscoring the need for more flexible and context-sensitive funding frameworks. Despite these challenges, the European development cooperation sector is uniquely positioned to deliver meaningful support, with its strong global networks and deep expertise.

Recent geopolitical and economic developments—including regional conflicts, shifts in major tech platform policies, and the abrupt suspension of U.S. development assistance—have further destabilised an already fragile ecosystem for independent journalism. These disruptions have jeopardised funding, distribution, and safety for media organisations and press freedom initiatives worldwide.

The next MFF should take into account the need to foster resilient information ecosystems in partner countries via international cooperation instruments and therefore make a priority in DG INTPA programming. This is clearly in the EU's economic and security-related interest, as autocratic states and hostile actors are running disinformation campaigns to undermine democratic processes, erode trust in mutually beneficial partnerships, or incite conflict.

3. Redesign journalism and media funding as a strategic democratic infrastructure

The current funding model for journalism is no longer fit for purpose. To ensure media and journalism can fulfil their democratic function, funding structures must be reimagined to reflect their role as critical infrastructure for democracy.

A comprehensive shift is required—from fragmented, short-term project-based grants to more strategic, long-term investment. This includes developing diversified funding portfolios that blend public, philanthropic, and private sources, alongside dedicated EU instruments capable of **offering sustained and flexible financial support for journalism in the public interest.**

The basis for this strategic shift is also set out in [the OECD Development Co-operation Principles for Relevant and Effective Support to Media](#)—specifically the Second Principle, which urges increased financial and other forms of support to public interest media and the information environment. Endorsed by EU countries, these principles were reaffirmed in the recent [EU Council statement on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day 2025](#), which welcomed the OECD Principles as a **common roadmap and reaffirmed the EU's commitment to inspire concrete, transformative action to restore and expand support for independent journalism.**

Such a rethinking also demands the establishment of transparent, independent governance frameworks for allocating funds, built on objective and viewpoint-neutral criteria. These should prioritise journalistic quality, innovation, and public value over profit imperative or political alignment.

In an era of systemic disinformation, democratic backsliding, and rising authoritarianism, **journalism must be treated** not as a commercial commodity or a nice-to-have charitable cause but **as an essential public good**, safeguarding the quality and security of our information supply, worthy of strategic investment and institutional protection.

Enforce and expand journalists' protection

- The European Commission should expand and strengthen its efforts to support Member States in improving journalist safety, including through the continued implementation of the [2021 Recommendation on the Protection, Safety and Empowerment of Journalists](#). National safety programmes led by media stakeholders should be funded to provide training, equipment, monitoring, legal assistance, and advocacy, thereby fostering a secure environment for journalists (e.g. PersVeilig).
- Continued support is also needed for Europe-wide mechanisms that monitor threats and attacks against journalists, offering legal and emergency aid while engaging governments to enhance protection policies (e.g. Media Freedom Rapid Response).
- Support should extend to journalists in exile, including dedicated safety funding and institutional partnerships that offer visas and fellowship opportunities.

Ensure the economic sustainability of independent and community media

- To guarantee the ongoing viability of independent journalism organisations, the EU and Member States must support and strengthen pan-European and national

journalism funds that have proven their impact. This is vital to ensuring a pluralistic and independent news sector remains economically viable in an increasingly digital and polarised information landscape.

- Existing funding approaches must be reviewed and broadened. While current support predominantly consists of project-based funding and business development aid, a far more comprehensive range of support mechanisms is needed to enable the sector to function effectively and fulfil its public service role, including as a bulwark against disinformation. Central to this is the need for more direct core support, as outlined in the [OECD Principles for Effective Media Support](#).
- Long-term, flexible funding mechanisms should be developed for local, investigative, community, and public interest journalism, both within the EU and in key partner countries.
- Journalism funding must be embedded within broader strategic frameworks, recognising it as critical infrastructure for a resilient and democratic Europe.
- Media and digital literacy programmes at national and local level are urgent not only to teach how to differentiate right to wrong and what professional journalism means, but also to make editorial media attractive to new audiences. For that, the media needs to be self-critical and innovative to avoid the growing news avoidance and unwillingness to pay for editorial content.
- Funding mechanisms must be designed to uphold and protect editorial independence, ensuring that support does not translate into influence or control.

Ensure effective implementation of EU legislation with adequate resourcing

- Adequate resources must be allocated to the secretariats of key EU bodies such as the European Board for Digital Services (DSA) and the European Board for Media Services (EMFA) to ensure proper enforcement of relevant legislation.
- Organisations responsible for monitoring EMFA implementation should be financially supported, and training should be provided for judges, lawyers, and journalists on the application of the anti-SLAPP Directive.

About the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD)

[GFMD](#) is a network of 215 member organisations across 80+ countries working to protect and promote media freedom and support journalism and media, and representing members' interests in key policy processes. GFMD holds Special Consultative Status with the UN ECOSOC and observer status at UNESCO. GFMD is the facilitator of the [EU Media Advocacy Group](#), an informal network for organisations within the journalism support, media development, digital rights, media freedom, and wider democracy support communities conducting advocacy work within European Union (EU) institutions on media-related issues.