Media concentration and pluralism in the EU

2007/2253(INI) - 25/09/2008 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 307 votes to 262, with 28 abstentions, an alternative joint resolution on concentration and pluralism in the media in the European Union, tabled by the PES, ALDE and Green /EFA groups.

The own-initiative report had been tabled for examination at plenary by Marianne **MIKKO** (PES, EE) on behalf of the Committee on Culture and Education. However, it was a revised version of the report that was finally adopted in plenary.

The new resolution urges the Commission and the Member States to safeguard media pluralism, to ensure that all EU citizens can access free and diversified media in all Member States and to recommend improvements when needed. Parliament firmly believes, in fact, that a pluralistic media system is an essential requirement for the continued existence of the democratic European social model.

Respect for competition and strengthening the legal framework: Parliament highlights the fact that the concentration of ownership of the media system creates an environment favouring the monopolisation of the advertising market, introduces barriers to the entry of new market players and also leads to uniformity of media content. It also points out that the development of the media system is increasingly driven by profit-making and that, therefore, societal, political or economic processes, or values expressed in journalists' codes of conduct, are not adequately safeguarded. It considers, therefore, that competition law must be interlinked with media law, in order to guarantee access, competition and quality and avoid conflicts of interests between media ownership concentration and political power.

Parliament demands the disclosure of ownership of all media outlets to help achieve greater transparency and that attention is paid to ensuring that national competition legislation on media, internet and communication technologies favours pluralism of the media. It considers that competition legislation must be applied in the media sector and that a maximum must be done to improve the competitiveness of European media groups. In parallel with respect for the principles of free competition, Parliament calls for the balance between public service broadcasting organisations and privately owned broadcasting organisations to be respected.

Parliament also invites the Commission to commit itself to promoting a stable legal framework with a guaranteed high standard of protection of pluralism in all the Member States.

Guaranteeing independence and quality: Members believe that the main objectives of public authorities should be to create conditions that ensure a high level of media quality (including in the public media), secure media diversity and guarantee the full independence of journalists. Moreover, Parliament considers the rules on media concentration should govern not only the ownership and production of media content, but also the (electronic) channels and mechanisms for access to and dissemination of content on the internet. In this regard, the alternative resolution calls for the creation of a charter for media freedom to guarantee freedom of expression and pluralism. It also stresses the need to institute monitoring and implementation systems for media pluralism based on reliable and impartial indicators. Members point to the importance of the creation and uniform application of editorial charters in Member States to prevent owners, shareholders, or outside bodies such as governments, from interfering with news content. A suitable balance among political and social sensibilities, in particular in the context of news and current affairs programmes should be ensured.

New media: while Parliament welcomes the dynamics and diversity brought into the media landscape by the new media and in particular weblogs (blogs) representing a new and important contribution to freedom of expression that is used more and more (both by professionals and individual citizens), their development still needs to be better monitored: Parliament encourages an open discussion on all issues relating to the status of blogs and the protection of copyrights at the level of online media, (with third parties having to mention the source when taking over declarations).

Media education: Members stress that media education should be enhanced to provide citizens with the means of bringing critical interpretation to bear on the ever-growing volume of information being imparted to them. This would also enable citizens to select the most appropriate media by allowing them to exercise their rights to the full where freedom of information and expression is concerned.

Broadcasting licensing and public channels: the alternative resolution calls on the Commission and the Member States to consolidate an objective framework for granting broadcasting licences in the areas of cable and satellite TV and analogue and digital broadcasting markets, on the basis of transparent and fair criteria, to prevent abuses by companies enjoying monopolies or dominant positions. Parliament reminds the Commission that on several occasions, it has been asked to draw up a directive that would aim to ensure pluralism, encourage and preserve cultural diversity, as well as to safeguard access for all media companies to the technical elements that can enable them to reach the public in its entirety. It invites the Member States to support high-quality public broadcasting services which can offer a real alternative to the programmes of commercial channels and can occupy a more high-profile place on the European scene as pillars of the preservation of media pluralism and democratic dialogue with citizens. Cooperation between European regulatory authorities also needs to be enhanced in the broadcasting sector.

Revision of the 2001 communication on state aids: Members call for the revision of the Commission's 2001 communication concerning the application to public broadcasting services of state aid rules to take due account of the Unesco Convention on cultural diversity and the Recommendation of 31 January 2007 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to Member States on the remit of public service media in the information society. The purpose is to ensure that any proposed measure or clarification is assessed as far as its impact on media pluralism is concerned and duly respects Member States' competences. There is a need to strengthen the role of the public service as an important guarantor of media pluralism in the Union and to enable it to participate freely in technological developments and deriving forms of content production and presentation (in the form of linear and non-linear services). The mandate of public service media should also include appropriate funding of new services.

The issue of the spectrum and frequency allocation in the digital context: the resolution considers for the public audiovisual media to fulfil their task in the era of digital technology, it is necessary for them to develop new information services and media over and above traditional programmes and to be able to interact with every digital network and platform. The European Parliament welcomes the implementation in certain Member States of provisions requiring cable television providers to include state-run channels and to allocate a section of the digital spectrum to public providers. It reiterates that the regulation of spectrum use must take account of public interest objectives such as media pluralism and thus cannot be subjected to a purely market based regime. Member States should, therefore, remain responsible for deciding on frequency allocation to serve the specific needs of their societies in particular with respect to safeguarding and promoting media pluralism. Parliament also calls for a balanced approach to the allocation of the digital dividend to ensure equitable access for all players.

Data protection: MEPs express concern about the dominant position of a few large online players, which restricts new market entrants and thereby stifles creativity and entrepreneurship in this sector. They call for greater transparency with respect to personal data and information on users stored by internet search engines, email providers and social networking sites. They consider that regulation at EU level sufficiently safeguards the accessibility of electronic programme guides and similar overview and navigation

facilities, but that further action could be considered to ensure that services of general interest are easily accessible. For this reason, Parliament calls on the Commission to ascertain whether minimal guidelines or sector-specific regulation are needed to safeguard media pluralism.