Strengthening Media Freedom: the Protection of Journalists in Europe, Hate Speech, Disinformation and the Role of Platforms

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The European Parliament adopted by 553 votes to 54, with 89 abstentions, a resolution on strengthening media freedom: the protection of journalists in Europe, hate speech, disinformation and the role of platforms.

Members recalled that the freedom, pluralism, independence and safety of journalists are essential components of the right to freedom of expression and information and are indispensable for the democratic functioning of the European Union and its Member States.

Media freedom has deteriorated in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified this decline and has also highlighted the importance of the media and the right to access independent, diverse and reliable information.

Media Freedom, media pluralism and the protection of journalists in Europe

Members reiterated their deep concern about the state of media freedom, in the context of continuing attacks in some Member States on journalists and media professionals because of their work, as well as the increasing denigration of the profession by the general public.

Parliament called on the Commission and the Member States to promote sustainable measures to fund and support independent and quality journalism, to develop a reliable framework for the protection of media freedom and pluralism and to strengthen tools such as the Media Pluralism Monitoring Instrument and the Council of Europe Platform for the Protection of Journalism and the Safety of Journalists.

Members condemned attempts to control public service media, particularly through public advertising, regretting that in some Member States public radio and television have become channels for pro-government propaganda.

They called on the Commission to treat attempts by Member State governments to damage media freedom and pluralism as constituting a serious and systematic abuse of powers and as going against the fundamental values of the EU as enshrined in Article 2 of the EU Treaty.

Stressing the risk to pluralism posed by the concentration of media ownership, Parliament called on the Commission to step up its efforts to ensure that the media publish information on their ownership structures, taking particular care to avoid political interference. The resolution stressed in this context that EU money cannot be spent on state-controlled media and media that distribute political propaganda.

Parliament condemned the use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) to silence or intimidate investigative journalists and outlets and create a climate of fear around their reporting of certain topics. It reiterated its call on the Commission to come forward with a comprehensive proposal for a legislative act aiming to establish minimum standards against SLAPP practices across the EU. Women journalists are especially vulnerable to harassment and intimidation and should therefore be subject to additional safeguards.

Members also expressed concern about attempts to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to sanction independent and critical media and to restrict media access to government decisions and actions. They reiterated their call for the creation of a permanent European fund for journalists in the framework of the next MFF (2021-2027), as redrafted in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, to provide direct financial support to journalists and independent media.

Hate speech

Deploring the increasing use of hate speech in political communication by governments and political parties across the EU, Parliament called on Member States to strongly condemn and sanction hate crimes, hate speech and scapegoating by politicians and public officials, at all levels and on all types of media.

Members also called on Member States, within the limits of the law, to guarantee and encourage freedom of expression, including artistic freedom, which is essential to vigorous democratic debate. However, they recalled that racist and xenophobic speech is not covered by freedom of expression. They reiterated their call on the Commission, Member States and social media companies to counter the spread of racism, xenophobia, LGBTI+ phobia and religious hatred on the internet.

Disinformation and the role of platforms

Members noted that social media have played a significant role in spreading misinformation and foreign interference. In addition, various forms of misinformation related, inter alia, to the COVID-19 pandemic, continue to spread around the world, most often targeting the most vulnerable communities with potentially harmful consequences for public safety, health and effective crisis management.

Parliament called for enhanced cooperation between online platforms and law enforcement agencies to limit the spread of messages inciting hatred or violence. However, the removal of illegal content should always be subject to review by the courts of the Member States in order to protect freedom of expression, including artistic freedom, the right to free and independent information and the fundamental rights of citizens in general.

Members also condemned conspiracy theories and publicly funded misinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting the EU and misleading the public about its aims and activities.

Media literacy

Parliament stressed the need to develop a comprehensive EU strategy on media literacy. It called on the Commission and the Member States to promote programmes and policies to foster media and information literacy among journalists and media practitioners, and to develop critical thinking and conscious reflection on the use of information and communication technologies. It suggested working closely with Member States and civil society organisations to develop curricula on information, media and data literacy.