

MANIFESTO ADOPTED BY THE
SEE MEDIA OBSERVATORY FINAL CONFERENCE 2016

TOWARDS MEDIA POLICY IN THE SERVICE OF THE PUBLIC

The media crisis which seriously affected the countries of South East Europe is essentially a crisis of journalism and democracy. Two decades of non-transparent and politically guided privatisation, with small media markets entangled in clientelistic networks and with state funds being directly or indirectly the main source of income for the majority of media outlets, resulted in a destruction of the public communication space of such proportions that radical media reform has become an urgent priority. If the media do not fulfil their task – the safeguarding of the public interest in the process of public communication – and if they fail in their role as a watchdog of those in power, then democracy is not government in the interest of all people but only in the interest of those who can afford it. Corrupt media spell a death sentence for democracy. Journalism that does not safeguard the public interest is the most destructive form of privatising freedom of expression.

Radical reform calls for active involvement by the governments, which are obliged to provide and protect the communication rights of people. Their principal task is to ensure the conditions that enable democratic media operation: the rule of law, equality before the law, transparency of media ownership and funding, and respect for freedom of expression as a fundamental human right. The hijacking of state systems by partial interest groups, the systematic subordination of the public interest to private interests, and disrespect for the rule of law and fundamental human rights destroy democracy. Having the media serve the public interest is critically dependent on having a government that serves the public interest.

The crisis fully brought to light all the pitfalls of the current funding methods. The media's dependence on advertising revenue inevitably puts them in the service of commercial interests, and their dependence on public funds is too often exploited by the political elites which use media power to fulfil their own goals. The funding that is currently awarded to the media, either directly or indirectly, is public funding, but in reality those state subsidies finance media

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**MEDIA
INTEGRITY
MATTERS**



South East European
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owners whose only goal is to increase profit rather than to ensure the quality of public debate. Accordingly, the media subsidy system should be revised, and governments should provide public sources and media policy instruments that would ensure long-term, sustainable operation, development and flourishing of the public and non-profit media.

The public interest in the media field, which was hijacked by media companies, should be reclaimed by the public and should become the guiding principle in the shaping of future media policies geared towards securing media integrity. The media are so important for democracy that their management and operation cannot be left to a small privileged group and cannot be the right of such a privileged minority only. The demand for functioning democracy, freedom and integrity of the media is our right and our duty.

The changes we demand here are systemic and structural in nature. Systemic changes should be based on the rule of law and radical reform of media policies to bring the public interest to the forefront of attention. In demanding reform, we aim to protect journalism as a profession whose sole purpose is to serve the public.

It is a long process and reform should be launched immediately. Structural changes are the supporting pillars at the foundation of system reform.

WITH THIS MANIFESTO WE DEMAND:

- **THE INITIATION OF A RADICAL REFORM** of media policy, which should focus on the public interest and media integrity. A first step in this comprehensive reform is a broad public debate which would lay the foundation for the definition and realisation of the public interest in the media field. The definition of the public interest should be a subject of political debate and negotiation between citizens and those who govern the state, to prevent clientelism from obstructing the law-making process and private interests from penetrating the media market disguised as legal norms.
- **ACCOUNTABILITY OF POLITICIANS.** Citizens should take a critical stance and engage in the political process to demand accountability from politicians who suppress the freedom and integrity of public and other media. The right to freedom of expression and media integrity should be actively protected.
- **THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A SYSTEM OF PUBLIC SUBSIDIES FOR MEDIA AND JOURNALISM,** which would enable long-term and systematic shaping of alternative models of media financing. The existing direct and indirect media subsidies should be revised to establish to what extent they indeed assure media integrity. The revised mechanisms, along with the new ones shaped in the process, should follow the primary goal of creating conditions that would enable the media to operate in the public interest.

- **THE UNCOMPROMISING TRANSPARENCY OF MEDIA OWNERSHIP AND OF DIRECT AND INDIRECT PUBLIC FUNDING.** To achieve this goal, open-access databases enabling efficient systematisation, analysis and overview of media ownership and public funding are a must. Such databases should clearly list media owners, ownership ties and ties among media owners and centres of political power (political groups, institutions and individual politicians), as well as information on the public funding of the media. The management of such databases should be publicly funded and entrusted to independent experts and civil society through concessions.
- **ADEQUATE MECHANISMS FOR EFFICIENT SUPERVISION OF MEDIA POLICY IMPLEMENTATION.** Regulatory agencies in the media field should work in the public interest and should be the guardians of media integrity. The members of regulatory bodies should not have conflicts of interest, and before they take up their positions, they should publicly declare their commitment to protecting the public interest. If a regulatory body is unable to fulfil its role and ensure the realisation of the highest media operation standards, it should announce this to the public and request assistance from international organisations to change the circumstances that obstruct its work. The most harmful form of regulation is that in which regulatory bodies fail to deliver on their tasks.
- **THE DEFINITION OF CLEAR CRITERIA FOR ALLOCATING PUBLIC FUNDS TO THE MEDIA.** Allocation criteria should be strictly based on citizens' communication needs and not on the commercial interests of media owners. All procedures involving subsidies as well as the media's spending of public funds should be transparent and honest, and their basic purpose should be to ensure media integrity. To fight corruption is to fight for democracy.
- **THE DEFINITION OF TERMS FOR AWARDING GOVERNMENT-COMMISSIONED ADVERTISEMENTS TO INDIVIDUAL MEDIA OUTLETS.** The terms should be transparent and should comply with the rules of public procurement. In countries where the flow of public funds is under exclusive control of political and/or economic elites, and accordingly the transparency and non-discriminatory terms of state-commissioned advertising cannot be ensured, the latter should be prohibited.
- **BANNING THOSE MEDIA WITH NON-TRANSPARENT OWNERSHIP STRUCTURE FROM RECEIVING PUBLIC FUNDS, OR ANY OTHER FORM OF SUBSIDIES AND CONCESSIONS.** High-integrity media can more easily fight corruption, clientelism, political instrumentalisation and abuse of opinion-leader power.
- **THE PROTECTION OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA,** as the only public good available to citizens in the field of communication.
- **THE PREVENTION AND SANCTIONING OF ANY ATTEMPT** on the part of various political groups to close down or silence a public media outlet, or to destroy it by denying it public funds, as well as of any attempt at influencing the appointment of management and supervisory boards of the public service

media. The public media need to be freed from the yoke of particular political interests, so that they can regain their central position within a democratic public sphere. To achieve this goal, public media employees should form a progressive coalition with citizens with the aim of protecting media autonomy and integrity.

- **A COMPREHENSIVE DEBATE ON JOURNALISM AND JOURNALISTS.** The journalists should initiate, within their associations and beyond, a comprehensive debate on who can be considered a journalist and what journalism is, and define what they themselves can do to protect the identity and integrity of their profession.
- **SYSTEMATIC FUNDING OF THE EMPLOYMENT OF JOURNALISTS.** The precarisation of the journalistic profession threatens media freedom. Precarious journalism is not capable of serving the public interest. Special attention should be devoted to young journalists at the start of their careers. The state should provide stipends and formulate employment policies that would enable safe and encouraging working conditions for young journalists.
- **THE LEGAL MECHANISMS TO PROTECT AND STRENGTHEN EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND EDITORIAL POSITIONS.** An editor is first among equals (journalists) and not an extended hand of executive boards and media owners. The task of the editor is to ensure that media integrity is always at the foundation of journalistic work.
- **SYSTEMATIC FUNDING OF QUALITY JOURNALISM AND SUPPORT FOR INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM PROJECTS AND OTHER TYPES OF QUALITY JOURNALISTIC PRODUCTION,** which is on the wane on account of rapid commercialisation. In accordance with democratic principles, the basic task of the media is to monitor the centres of political power and to enable citizens to participate in political activities and decision-making processes. A media policy that serves the public interest must support and develop the culture and practice of media integrity. Any media that do not sustain the highest standards of journalistic practices and media management should not receive public subsidies and should not be allowed to use public resources.
- **SUPPORT FOR NON-PROFIT LOCAL AND COMMUNITY MEDIA** which meet the information needs of local communities. The media crisis had its most disastrous effect on local media and journalism. The shutting down of correspondent offices and deliberate non-coverage of local political events create an environment that breeds corruption. The public interest should be protected on the local, national and international/supranational levels.
- **THE ALLOCATION, UNDER FAVOURABLE TERMS, OF PART OF THE BROADCASTING SPECTRUM TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES, CIVIL GROUPS AND INITIATIVES** which aim to create non-profit media programmes and content.

- **SUPPORT FOR MEDIA LITERACY PROGRAMMES AND ACTIVE INCLUSION OF CITIZENS IN THE SHAPING OF MEDIA POLICY.** Journalists and other media workers need to regain public trust in their profession. The media should develop various methods to include the public in their work. Citizens need to be aware that quality journalism must be adequately remunerated. Active inclusion of citizens in media co-financing is not a supplement for public policy. It is a form of active participation within the media sphere.
- **PUBLICATION OF INDEPENDENT ESTIMATES OF BROADCASTING DIGITALISATION COSTS.** These would show who profited from digitalisation and who was pushed to the margins of the digitalised world.
- **CONSISTENT SUPPORT FOR MEDIA INTEGRITY PRINCIPLES ON THE PART OF DONORS.** Donor support influences the media system of the state or region in question in the long and short-term run. Donors should shun particular political goals and follow exclusively the general public interest.
- **RESPECT FOR THE HIGHEST LEGAL AND ETHICAL STANDARDS IN MEDIA MANAGEMENT AND OPERATION ON THE PART OF FOREIGN OWNERS AND MEDIA CORPORATIONS WHO BUY OR ESTABLISH MEDIA IN SPECIFIC REGIONS.** Respect for tax, labour and media laws and creation of an environment that enables the autonomy and integrity of editors and journalists should be their first and foremost commitment.
- **A PROACTIVE APPROACH FROM THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION.** The EC should, through political activity and using financial instruments intended for the candidate countries of South East Europe, create the conditions conducive to the development of quality public media and should advocate and protect freedom of expression as one of the basic human rights. The EU's demand that individual countries should ensure media freedom and integrity should not be subject to particular political goals and compromises, but should be consistently and unconditionally implemented. The protection of media pluralism, respect for media integrity, protection of the public interest and support for the operation of public media are the foundations of a democratic media policy – in EU member states as well as in the candidate countries of South East Europe.



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CITIZENS AND JOURNALISTS!

The above-listed demands have been formulated with clear aims in mind:

TO REGAIN INTEGRITY FOR THE MEDIA,

TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE CREATION OF A MEDIA SYSTEM THAT WILL SERVE THE PUBLIC INTEREST, AND

TO DEMONSTRATE THAT CHANGES CAN BE MADE IF WE KNOW WHAT WE WANT.

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