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Summary

EU for Freedom of Expression – North Macedonia
Workshop on media reforms October 12-13 2023

„Towards a sustainable, diverse and safe media sector: supporting democracy and pluralism and serving the citizen“

The aim of this workshop was to foster a comprehensive discussion on the evolving landscape of media and the digital realm, and the associated challenges confronting journalism and media outlets. Furthermore, it sought to identify pathways for media reforms in the Republic of North Macedonia. The objective is to align national legislation with the European Commission's latest regulations—specifically, the European Media Freedom Act and the Digital Services Act. This alignment also considers the guidelines and recommendations of the Council of Europe and other international organisations.

Representatives from all media sectors, civil society organizations within the media domain, independent experts, and representatives from various relevant institutions and bodies attended the workshop. The vibrant discussion saw a plethora of insights and suggestions regarding the direction of media reforms in the country. Key issues discussed during the workshop included the following:

I. *Competitiveness, sustainability and plurality of the market*

- In terms of the number of entities in the media market, there's significant fragmentation across all sectors. Coupled with the rising use of online media and the outflow of advertising revenues to global networks and service providers, many local media outlets have faced economic challenges over time. Data from the regulator indicates that total revenues in the audiovisual sector have been steady declining since 2016 across all sectors. However, it's also evident that the five state-level terrestrial television channels attract the largest share of revenue, accounting for 85% in the TV sector.
- The current rules regarding ownership concentration in the audiovisual sector are overly restrictive, impeding the sector's consolidation and growth. Moreover, these rules don't encompass informative online media. As per recent EU documents, online media should also be safeguarded from political and other external influences, necessitating rules on transparency of ownership and sources of funding.
- Updates and enhancements to the current licensing model in the audiovisual sector are essential to align legal provisions with emerging types of audiovisual services. There's also a pressing need to reevaluate the criteria for setting the amount of license fees to be paid by AVM service providers.
- Piracy issues within the audiovisual sector should be addressed within the scope of the existing copyright protection framework. However, prompt alignment with EU directives is essential for this purpose. Strengthening the capacity and ensuring coordinated efforts of institutions tasked with copyright and related rights protection are also imperative.

II. *Social and economic status of journalists*

- Economic instability directly impacts the rights and position of journalists and media workers. They primarily grapple with low wages, job uncertainty and scarce resources concerning their social and employment rights. Among them, freelance journalists are the most vulnerable in terms of job protection.
- Amendments to the existing media legislation are necessary in order to ensure special protection of the social and labour rights of journalists and media workers. The legislation should be aligned with the provisions of the EU Media Freedom Act, EC recommendations No. 6650 of 2021 and No. 1634 of 2022, as well as with the Charter on Journalists Working Conditions of the European Federation of Journalists.
- Media outlets should establish internal documents governing the relationships among owners, management and journalists. It's essential that journalists and media staff are provided with employment contracts that ensure the full spectrum of their employment rights.
- It's crucial to endorse the unionization of journalists and media workers and to establish collective agreements. Drawing inspiration from certain European nations, such as Denmark, where collective agreements safeguard the labor rights of both employed and freelance journalists and media workers, would be beneficial.

III. *Advancing Media Pluralism: Models for financing content creation and bolstering quality journalism and news coverage*

- Media pluralism stands as a cornerstone of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive. It's emphasized alongside cultural and linguistic diversity, audience protection, content accessibility, human rights adherence, non-discrimination, the smooth operation of the internal market, and the encouragement of fair competition.
- Per EU regulations, any state aid, subsidies or other financial assistance to media service providers must adhere to stringent criteria. The Media Freedom Act especially underscores the necessity for transparent and impartial criteria when allocating funds to these providers.
- In terms of threats to media pluralism, the following concerns were highlighted: vulnerable groups and local communities have limited access to media content; editorial departments serving smaller linguistic communities within the public service are under-resourced; non-profit and community media remain underdeveloped; and local private media outlets within communities face economic challenges.
- In the Republic of North Macedonia, support for content production is presently limited to the funds allocated by the Film Agency. There's a pressing need to set up a dedicated fund to encourage pluralism and diversity of media content and investigative journalism.

IV. *Combatting Online Harms: An Overview of the EU Regulatory Framework, National Strategies and Initiatives and Suggestions for Enhancing Their Efficacy*

- The Media Freedom Act underscores the importance of harmonized rules safeguarding the independence of all media, whether online or offline. Media service providers that deliver news and current affairs must maintain transparency and independence in their editorial policy.
- In North Macedonia's media legislation, provisions should be incorporated that are technologically neutral, encompassing these types of media. This inclusion is also a demand from the representatives of the online media sector. Moreover, it's vital to enhance the self-regulatory framework, foundational for elevating ethical and professional standards across all media sectors.
- In relation to the detrimental aspects of online content, the country has seen various initiatives and endeavours by civil society organizations, such as the Network Against Hate Speech, fact-checking services and a range of activities promoting media and digital literacy to combat disinformation. These initiatives warrant continued support and development.
- Yet, what's absent is a holistic strategic approach to integrating media literacy into formal education. There's a need for a well-coordinated effort from all relevant institutions concerning digital security. Additionally, a comprehensive strategy involving all stakeholders is crucial to address disinformation and hate speech effectively.

The workshop took place under the umbrella of the "EU for Freedom of Expression: Alignment of National Media Legislation with EU acquis and European Media Standards" project's Second Phase. Drawing from the findings showcased at the Workshop and the ensuing discussions and suggestions from participants, the expert team will, over the next two months, formulate specific recommendations for revisions to the media legislation. These proposals, coupled with analyses conducted during the project, will lay the foundation for subsequent discussions focused on further legislative amendments.