# Regional Cooperation to Strengthen Independent Media in Southeast Europe

*Recommendations from a Consultative Process*

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## About the Author

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# Introduction

The media sectors of countries in Southeast Europe face numerous obstacles. The region is oversaturated with news outlets competing for funding in small media markets with declining advertising revenues.[1] Due to financial pressures, many outlets are under the influence of political parties or business groups through nontransparent patterns of financing and ownership.[2]

Many small, independent media outlets lack the equipment and staff necessary to produce high-quality news, and journalists are often underpaid. Threats against journalists who criticize the government are on the rise across the region.[3] Last year in Serbia, during anti-government demonstrations, journalists were frequently attacked by protesters and the police. While the authorities were often able to quickly identify perpetrators of violence against journalists, these incidents were rarely followed by successful prosecutions.[4] In Croatia, journalists and media outlets are facing a new wave of nuisance lawsuits—Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)—which are used to intimidate investigative journalists and independent media.[5]

The COVID-19 pandemic has also substantially impacted independent media in the region. News outlets have suffered a drastic decrease in revenues, forcing them to reduce their content or lay off employees.[6] This comes amidst an overall decline in international assistance to media in the region. While political instability in these countries has led to a slight increase in donor funding to media in recent years, levels remain far below what they were in the late 1990s and early 2000s.[7]

## Press Freedom Rankings in Southeast Europe



| | |
|---|---|
| 36 | Slovenia |
| 56 | Croatia |
| 58 | Bosnia-Herzegovina |
| 78 | Kosovo |
| 83 | Albania |
| 90 | North Macedonia |
| 93 | Serbia |
| 104 | Montenegro |

Source: Reporters Without Borders' 2021 World Press Freedom Index

Despite these challenges, Southeast Europe has a strong tradition of national and regional advocacy to advance media reforms and protect independent media. As discussed in a recent CIMA report, *United by Challenge: Regional Opportunities to Drive Media Reform in Southeast Europe*, media networks in the region have strong capacities and expertise, and have proven to be critical actors in advancing legal and policy reforms that enable a robust independent media sector to develop and thrive. However, these media networks and coalitions are at a turning point and need to work together to create and sustain common agendas and platforms for cooperation.[8]

> *"Southeast Europe has a strong tradition of national and regional advocacy to advance media reforms and protect independent media… However, these media networks and coalitions are at a turning point and need to work together to create and sustain common agendas and platforms for cooperation."*

This context formed the basis for a multiday virtual discussion hosted by the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) and Deutsche Welle Akademie in May–July 2021 with leading media experts and advocates who discussed how best to galvanize the region's tradition of cooperation and leverage the substantial expertise of local networks to address the new threats independent media are facing. The consultative event brought together approximately 40 media experts, advocates, journalists, and representatives from regulatory bodies and journalists' associations from eight countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia. The participants identified more strategic and sustained regional cooperation as a necessary mechanism for developing solutions and ways of working together.

Through the course of the consultative process, the participants coalesced around three main priorities to guide joint action moving forward:

- Addressing the urgent financial and legal challenges that journalists and media outlets are confronting in several countries
- Improving media ownership transparency to address media capture and increasing editorial interference through funding and ownership of media outlets
- Building greater influence with regional and multilateral institutions that set norms and standards for media in Southeast Europe

To create a shared agenda for action, the participants organized working groups that identified shared goals and determined a process for follow-up collaboration on these issues.

# Addressing the Urgent Financial and Legal Challenges to Media

Participants in this working group identified the need to create a platform to respond quickly to journalists and media outlets under financial or legal duress and raise awareness of emerging issues with policymakers and regional institutions.

The ability of journalists to operate freely and independently has deteriorated in several countries in recent years. There have been escalations in the scale and nature of attacks, including online and physical harassment against journalists, particularly female journalists; SLAPPs that aim to silence and intimidate those who are critical of ruling parties and government officials; and the circulation of disinformation meant to discredit independent journalism. Safeguards to protect media from harassment exist in several countries, but their implementation is lax. Participants stressed that the vilification of journalists and media outlets is organized and deliberate, and that governments in the region are using similar tactics to silence independent media.

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Additionally, the dire financial situations of many independent news outlets in these countries have made them vulnerable to capture and have reduced their ability to produce high-quality journalism. For this reason, participants suggest that a regional platform should also be equipped to meet the urgent need for rapid funding, which could be easily disbursed to struggling news outlets.

Participants stressed that greater collaboration and clear joint priorities are needed to address the dual legal and financial threats media are facing. Associations of journalists and media organizations in the region have been working on this at the national level, putting out press releases that condemn attacks on journalists and media outlets. However, these efforts have not yielded significant results, as journalists' associations often lack the resources to provide effective legal and financial aid and struggle to gain leverage in national and regional policymaking spaces.[9]

Governments have proven unable and unwilling to address these issues and attacks are typically not prosecuted. Additionally, there are several studies demonstrating that governments in the region are allocating public revenues to pro-government media that avoid criticizing ruling parties.[10]

Moving forward, members of this working group have proposed working together to design and execute several joint initiatives.

1. **Prepare a joint "SOS call to action"** to warn of the dire situation of media in Southeast Europe. This will also articulate the need to save quality journalism and highlight the need to reform media assistance and funding approaches. The call to action will be directed toward donors and regional and multilateral institutions, emphasizing the challenges facing independent media in the region and the urgent need to address them.

2. **Establish a task force** to put these issues at the forefront of policy debates for national governments, the international community, and donors. Where possible, the task force will leverage existing platforms like the SafeJournalists network—a European Commission–supported project in the Western Balkans. The group aims to bring together regional journalists' associations, trade unions of media workers, and other civil society groups to advocate for the protection of journalists among high-ranking politicians and European Union (EU) representatives.

3. **Coordinate more effectively with international and regional media freedom organizations** such as the International and European Federations of Journalists, the International Press Institute, the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, and Reporters Without Borders, among others.

4. **Leverage EU mechanisms**, such as the media recovery Action Plan, itself part of a larger European Democracy Action Plan, and ensure such initiatives include the media in Southeast Europe. Members of the group will work with such initiatives to ensure there is a robust consultative process with key organizations and networks to determine the priorities and goals of such programs, and the mechanisms for allocating funds.

5. **Work to reform the systems and processes** for donor funding in the media sector, which suffer from lack of coordination, transparency, evaluation of effectiveness, and overly complicated and bureaucratic application procedures that benefit only the highest-capacity organizations. The working group will advocate for more flexible and responsive funding that responds to local needs and can help the media sectors of Southeast Europe recover from crises and support media advocates to respond more efficiently to new threats.

The working group identified several upcoming opportunities to continue advancing its priorities, and to strengthen a regional network focused on these issues, including the European Federation of Journalists meeting in Zagreb, Croatia, in October 2021, and the South East Europe Media Forum (SEEMF) organized by the South East Europe Media Organisation in Belgrade, Serbia, in November 2021.

# Increasing Transparency of Media Ownership and Funding

Several research studies demonstrate the lack of transparency in media financing and ownership in several countries in Southeast Europe.

Public funding for media is often used for political aims, and wealthy elites affiliated with political partners are known to finance media outlets to advance political and economic interests.[11] Information regarding ownership and funding is difficult to find. While some information is available through the registers of broadcasters managed by regulatory agencies, most of it is difficult to access and incomplete. It is even more difficult to get a clear picture with online media, as financial support for these outlets is typically anonymous, facilitating the spread of disinformation and propaganda.[12]



Financial backing and economic incentives are used to control and put pressure on the media from political and business groups in Southeast Europe. This is an issue that is not only important for larger media companies, but also for smaller, local news outlets.[13] Since most countries in the region face similar media ownership issues, participants identified the need for an overall unified approach and clear agenda of how to tackle it. Media ownership transparency is already on the agenda of EU stakeholders,[14] and participants can use the built-in EU leverage points, such as the process of EU integration, to gain momentum.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Council of Europe, and the EU have tried to address the issue of economic influence and nontransparent ownership in the media sectors of Southeast Europe,[15] but have struggled to gain traction due to a lack of political will to amend ownership legislation or implement existing legislation to protect media independence.[16]

This working group has proposed several joint initiatives on the issue of media ownership transparency.

1. **Map legal frameworks** for media ownership transparency in the region and identify similarities and differences among countries. This will enable the group to produce data-driven recommendations for addressing existing challenges. These recommendations will be based on a common understanding of the influence of legal frameworks on ownership transparency and media independence. Participants stressed that while some countries in the region have good legal frameworks, they are not implemented effectively and fail to prevent media capture.

2. **Raise awareness among the public** of the use of taxpayer funds to support propagandistic media, and of the deleterious impact of media ownership trends on the broader information environment.

3. **Develop a regional database** to provide data on national and regional trends in media ownership and financing in Southeast Europe using the same methodology as the Euromedia Ownership Monitor, a new initiative of the European Union. Some of this work is already underway, supported by the European Commission, but it excludes non-EU countries.[17] The working group would like to see local networks in EU candidate countries receive funding to work closely with regulators and other civil society groups to map ownership patterns.

4. **Link with other initiatives** working on the transparency of beneficial ownership in parallel sectors, such as good governance networks. For instance, beneficial ownership is a priority of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) process, but media ownership transparency has been largely excluded from it. Efforts are underway to integrate media ownership transparency into the OGP process, and will be discussed as part of an OGP Western Balkans annual regional meeting in October 2021.

# Building Greater Influence with Regional and Multilateral Institutions

The background research prepared ahead of the consultation process identified more than 40 networks and coalitions working to support media in Southeast Europe.[18]

Regional coalitions and national-level civil society networks played a vital role in previous media reform efforts in the region and have built substantial organizational capacities, expertise, and knowledge. Despite this, there is a need for these coalitions to join forces and create an advocacy network that could provide an inclusive platform for EU institutions and member and non-member states in the region to develop shared agendas for action on media-related issues.

| Organization | Year Founded | Focus |
|---|---|---|
| South East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO) | 2000 | ■ Press freedom ■ Journalism awards |
| Eurovision News Exchange for Southeast Europe (ERNO) | 2000 | ■ News exchange and trainings for public broadcasters |
| South East European Network for Professionalization of Media (SEENPM) | 2000 | ■ Media research and advocacy ■ Trainings |
| Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) | 2004 | ■ Media production ■ Fellowships and awards |
| Network of Journalist Associations/SafeJournalists network | 2016 | ■ Journalist safety ■ Media rights |
| Network of Media Regulators/JUFREX project | 2016 | ■ Trainings for judges and regulators ■ Regulatory analysis |
| SEE Check | 2020 | ■ Fact-checking |

Participants in this working group affirmed the necessity of establishing a platform for dialogue to facilitate the co-creation of concrete solutions to the major challenges that are common to countries in the region. This model should be mindful of existing initiatives and networks. The platform should provide opportunities for synergy and coherent action while avoiding duplication of efforts. The OGP process is a useful model for media advocates in the region to consider, as it brings governments and civil society organizations together to build consensus on shared priorities.

Determining which key stakeholders to engage, and identifying the major events and forums to influence, is a key short-term priority for this working group.

The aim of this regional group is to put the main priorities for media in the region at the forefront of policy discussions at the national level, and within the EU. Within the EU, media priorities sometimes take a backseat to other agendas, even though there have recently been new initiatives to address media freedom.[19] Yet, more effort needs to be made to leverage the EU's norm-setting power to guarantee media freedom and independence. At the national level, the working group recognized that media issues are rarely put on the policy agendas of countries in Southeast Europe. Advocates need to identify clear, shared priorities and develop strategies for getting them on the policy agendas in their countries. Participants identified several potential platforms where they can start to develop their proposals and push forward their advocacy agendas, such as the EU–Western Balkan Media Days, SEEMF, and the OSCE regional conferences on media. They also noted the importance of regional political meetings, such as the Bled Strategic Forum and the Berlin Process Summit, in driving their agendas forward.

# Conclusion and Recommendations

The media sector in Southeast Europe faces numerous complex challenges, and there is an urgent need to address them.

Three main action items emerged from the consultation: providing urgent financial and legal support for journalists and media outlets; creating a joint approach to improve transparency in media ownership and financing; and building a regional advocacy network to engage key stakeholders and institutions. Each working group will develop concrete activities to help reach each goal.

In summary, the consultation produced several recommendations for improving joint action and regional cooperation for media reform in Southeast Europe:

- Media organizations across the region should engage strategically with the major donors supporting media assistance. This should ensure that assistance is rooted in local needs and priorities and leverages the substantial collective expertise of media advocates and civil society.

- There are several regional networks, coalitions, and projects working to reform media systems and protect independent media in Southeast Europe. Rather than duplicate existing efforts, advocates should work with existing initiatives, such as the SafeJournalists network, to advance their priorities.

- A database on media transparency ownership and financing should be established for non-EU and EU candidate countries in the region using the same methodology as the EU Media Ownership Monitor.

- A strong regional advocacy network should be set up to enhance communication and collaboration among EU institutions and member and non-member states in the region on media-related issues.

# Endnotes

1   For example, in the Western Balkans, there are thousands of commercial media outlets and around 210 public broadcasting channels. See Sanela Hodžić and Brankica Petković, *Sustainability of Professional Journalism in the Media Business Environment in the Western Balkans* (Skopje: European Union Technical Assistance to Civil Society Organisations in the Western Balkans and Turkey (TACSO), 2020), *http://tacso.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Sustainability-of-Professional-Journalism-in-WB-Study-final.pdf*, 9.

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9   Ibid.

10  For example: Marius Dragomir, "Control the Money, Control the Media: How Government Uses Funding to Keep Media in Line," *Journalism* 19, no. 8 (September 2017), *https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884917724621*; Florian Bieber and Marko Kmezic, *Media Freedom in the Western Balkans* (Belgrade, Serbia, and Graz, Austria: Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, August 2015), *https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/BIEPAG-Media-Freedom-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf*.

11  Hodžić and Petković, *Sustainability of Professional Journalism*, 22–23; Davor Marko, "Western Balkans Public Media on Life Support," *MediaPowerMonitor*, August 17, 2016, *https://mpmonitor.org/2016/08/western-balkans-public-media-on-life-support/*.

12  Hodžić and Petković, *Sustainability of Professional Journalism*, 12.

13  "A Difficult Profession: Media Freedom under Attack in the Western Balkans," Human Rights Watch, July 15, 2015, *https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/07/15/difficult-profession/media-freedom-under-attack-western-balkans#*.

14  For example, in its yearly reports on Western Balkan countries, the EU has been pointing to the need to improve media transparency. The 2020 reports can be found here: EWB, "European Commission Publishes 2020 WB Country Reports," European Western Balkans, October 6, 2020, *https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/10/06/european-commission-publishes-2020-wb-country-reports/*.

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