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Local and regional media: watchdogs of democracy, guardians of community cohesion

Current Affairs Committee

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Current Affairs Committee

Summary

Local and regional authorities have a sound interest in combating media desertification and in ensuring the existence of strong, independent local and regional media in their communities Not only do subnational media serve as crucial avenues of information – ensuring that citizens understand and are aware of the policies put in place by their regional or municipal councillors – they also strengthen the legitimacy of local and regional authorities by holding them accountable to their citizens. However, over the past decades, local and regional media have been in decline in many Council of Europe member States.

The present report explores this growing trend towards media deserts in European towns and regions, their impact on democracy, and the role of local and regional authorities in combating such phenomena. It outlines the key challenges the subnational media sector faces and highlights its key political and socio-cultural roles in upholding democratic communities.

In a resolution addressed to local and regional authorities and a recommendation to governments of member States, the Congress calls for action to be taken to support strong and independent subnational media.

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1 L: Chamber of Local Authorities / R: Chamber of Regions.
EPP/CCE: European People's Party Group in the Congress.
SOC/G/PD: Group of Socialists, Greens and Progressive Democrats.
ILDG: Independent Liberal and Democratic Group.
ECR: European Conservatives and Reformists Group.
NR: Members not belonging to a political group of the Congress.

DRAFT RESOLUTION[2]

1. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (Congress) refers to:

a. its 2021-2026 priority b. "Democratic societies: quality of representative democracy and citizen participation", stating that the protection of independent media and the provision of correct information to all citizens are crucial for the quality of representative democracy;

b. its Resolution 374(2014), outlining the key role of subnational media as a tool for building participatory democracy;

c. the explanatory memorandum on local and regional media as watchdogs of democracy and catalysts of communities (CG-CUR(2023)3_01);

d. the United Nations Agenda Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 16 "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions" and its Target 16.10 "Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements";

e. Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)1 of the Committee of Ministers on media pluralism and transparency of media ownership, which states that media freedom and pluralism are crucial corollaries of the right to freedom of expression, as guaranteed by Article 10 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms;

f. Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)4 of the Committee of Ministers on promoting a favourable environment for quality journalism in the digital age and its guidelines, in particular paragraphs 1.1.5 calling on States to develop and promote a range of funding schemes and instruments, including at the local level to uphold media diversity as a basis for quality journalism, 1.3.2. on the promotion of media pluralism and diversity, 2.4.3. on local and hyperlocal media, 2.5.1. on the complementary nature of different media types, and 2.5.5. on political non-interference of local authorities in media;

g. the Declaration of 13 February 2019 by the Committee of Ministers on the financial sustainability of quality journalism in the digital age outlining that public policy measures should be developed and strengthened to ensure that types of media serving local and rural communities have financial and legal resources and space to operate on all distribution platforms;

h. the Council of Europe Campaign for the Safety of Journalists, launched in October 2023 under the Council of Europe Presidency of Latvia.

2. The Congress notes with concern that:

a. the decline of local and regional media and the emergence of so-called local news deserts risk undermining the crucial role that subnational media play in upholding democracy at the local and regional levels and in fostering cohesion in the communities they serve;

b. rural and socio-economically disadvantaged communities are particularly likely to become local news deserts, exacerbating already existing inequalities;

c. the proximity of local and regional media to the communities they serve and to public authorities can make them particularly susceptible to pressure and political interference or even violence, undermining their independence and their role as watchdogs of local and regional democracy;

d. local and regional media are particularly vulnerable to economic downturns and have been among the hardest-hit economic sectors during the Covid-19 pandemic, which poses a risk to their financial sustainability;

e. local and regional media have limited resources to train and upskill staff and journalists, impacting their position in the digital environment and the quality of media content.

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[2] Preliminary draft resolution approved by the Current Affairs Committee on 21 September 2023

3. The Congress calls on local and regional authorities in member States to:

a. launch public awareness campaigns to highlight the importance of local news and the consequences of local news deserts in co-operation with community leaders, civil society, journalistic organisations and residents;

b. attract and retain talented journalists in local communities through fellowships, internships and other programmes providing opportunities, training and financial support;

c. develop a code of practice and training for elected officials and local and regional administrations regarding interactions with local media that promote transparency, openness and effective communication to protect independence and avoid political interference;

d. design and implement a support system for local and regional media that is transparent and has the public interest at its core, and encourage the establishment and development of non-profit news organisations, community media outlets and hyperlocal news initiatives that can help fill the gaps left by declining commercial media;

e. promote collaborative journalism initiatives that foster partnerships between local news outlets, community organisations, schools and academic institutions with a view to pooling resources, expertise and audience reach to ensure comprehensive local news coverage.

4. The Congress calls on national associations of local and regional authorities to support their members in the implementation of this Resolution.

5. The Congress commits to supporting the Council of Europe Campaign on the Safety of Journalists through the promotion of the safety and independence of local and regional journalists and encourages its members to join their respective member State's national chapter if possible.

DRAFT RECOMMENDATION[3]

1. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (Congress) refers to:

a. its 2021-2026 priority b. "Democratic societies: quality of representative democracy and citizen participation", stating that independent media and the provision of correct information to all citizens are crucial for the quality of representative democracy;

b. its Recommendation 364(2014), outlining the key role of subnational media as a tool for building participatory democracy;

c. the explanatory memorandum on local and regional media as watchdogs of democracy and catalysts of communities (CG-CUR(2023)3_01);

d. the United Nations Agenda Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 16 "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions" and its Target 16.10 "Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements";

e. Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)1 of the Committee of Ministers on media pluralism and transparency of media ownership, which states that media freedom and pluralism are crucial corollaries of the right to freedom of expression, as guaranteed by Article 10 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms;

f. Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)4 of the Committee of Ministers on promoting a favorable environment for quality journalism in the digital age and its guidelines, in particular paragraphs 1.1.5 calling on States to develop and promote a range of funding schemes and instruments, including at the local level to uphold media diversity as a basis for quality journalism, 1.3.2. on the promotion of media pluralism and diversity, 2.4.3. on local and hyperlocal media, 2.5.1. on the complementary nature of different media types, and 2.5.5. on political non-interference of local authorities in media;

g. the Declaration of 13 February 2019 by the Committee of Ministers on the financial sustainability of quality journalism in the digital age outlining that public policy measures should be developed and strengthened to ensure that types of media serving local and rural communities have financial and legal resources and space to operate on all distribution platforms;

h. the Council of Europe Campaign on the Safety of Journalists, launched in October 2023 under the Council of Europe Presidency of Latvia.

2. The Congress notes with concern that:

a. the decline of local and regional media and the emergence of so-called local news deserts risk undermining the crucial role that subnational media play in upholding democracy at the local and regional levels and in fostering the communities they serve;

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c. the proximity of local and regional media to the communities they serve and to public authorities can make them particularly susceptible to pressure and political interference or even violence, undermining their independence and their role as watchdogs of local and regional democracy;

d. local and regional media are particularly vulnerable to economic downturns and have been among the hardest-hit economic sectors during the Covid-19 pandemic, which poses a risk to their financial sustainability;

e. local and regional media have limited resources to train and upskill staff and journalists, impacting their position in the digital environment and the quality of media content.

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[3] Preliminary draft recommendation approved by the Current Affairs Committee on 21 September 2023

3. The Congress asks the Committee of Ministers to invite the respective national authorities of the member States of the Council of Europe to:

a. invest in comprehensive data collection and comparative research to better understand and address the challenges faced by local and regional media in their respective member State;

b. address inequalities in local news access by promoting affordable broadband access and digital literacy programmes as well as media literacy initiatives, including via schools and from an early age onwards, and taking into account the specific needs of local and regional media, in particular in disadvantaged communities;

c. consider the specific challenges faced by local and regional journalists when carrying out activities in the framework of the Council of Europe Campaign on the Safety of Journalists and include new local and regional organisations as well as local and regional authorities in their respective national chapters;

d. develop comprehensive policies and transparent support systems with direct and indirect subsidies to address challenges faced by subnational media, to promote innovation and to foster quality local and regional journalism;

e. create a level playing field and ensure that local news is visible and accessible online through policy initiatives that specifically address the power of digital platforms and their impact on local and regional media.

4. The Congress calls on the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to take account of this Recommendation and the explanatory memorandum contained in document (CG-CUR(2023)3_01) in their activities on this issue relating to Council of Europe member States.

EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION[4]

1. A pluralistic media landscape, providing a variety of information and points of view is essential to democratic societies. In particular local and regional media play a crucial role in the functioning of grassroot democracy, by providing reliable and local information to citizens and by holding decision-makers and local and regional authorities accountable. Local and regional media not only see and reflect communities but play an important role in shaping them too.

2. The Congress has outlined the role that regional media plays in promoting citizens' participation in its 2014 report on "The role of regional media as a tool for building participatory democracy". Local and regional media can promote a sense of involvement and social cohesion in local and regional communities and foster citizen participation while building trustworthy relationship between citizens and authorities. High-quality local and regional journalism has a positive impact on participatory democracy, with studies having shown a link between the development of local and regional media and the turnout of voters at elections, as well as the overall participation of citizens in electoral campaigns and the day-to-day life of their respective municipalities.[5] In addition, in the framework of its election observation missions, Congress delegations systematically exchange views with media representatives on local and regional elections campaigns as well as on the overall media landscape. Their analyses are reflected in Congress election observation reports.

3. However, since the last Congress thematic report on subnational media, and despite their important role in strengthening local and regional democracy, social cohesion and trust, local and regional media have been in decline in several member States. Indeed, local and regional media in Europe and other parts of the world, have been severely affected by digital transformation and the emerging online communicative environment which is dominated by large corporate global platforms. Due to constantly changing political, economic and media landscape as well as changing consumer behaviours, among other factors, local and regional media have struggled to continue their operations. The sector historically received limited attention in research and policy discussions. However, in recent years, there has been a surge of interest in local and regional media, driven by a perceived crisis in the sector, that saw many outlets closing down leaving communities without reliable local news providers.

4. As outlined in Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)1 of the Committee of Ministers on media pluralism and transparency of media ownership, media pluralism is a crucial corollary of the right to freedom as expression. Debate, scrutiny of decision-makers and the expression of different opinions are key in democratic societies, and local media are key actors in allowing this democratic debate and accountability to flourish at local level.

5. As such, and while the decline of local and regional media may in many cases be due to other factors than limitations in the freedom of expression, it should nonetheless be understood as a risk to grassroots democracy and a weakening of the barriers to violations of rights outlined in the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS n°5).

6. Towns, cities and regions have a responsibility to respect and protect human rights at subnational level, and the existence of strong, independent subnational media is an inherent part of the protection of the freedom of expression at grassroots level. Local and regional elected officials thus not only have an interest, but also a duty to combat media desertification and to ensure the existence of strong, independent local and regional media in their communities.

7. Local and regional media have crucial political and socio-cultural functions, many of which are of shared interest to local and regional authorities, such as the promotion of social cohesion and the stimulation of dialogue.

8. Local media are key channels for citizens to stay informed about decisions taken by local and regional authorities, which – especially in the case of smaller municipalities – rarely receive the limelight in national news outlets. In particular elected officials have an interest in ensuring that information about the policies they put in place is known amongst their constituents. Strong local and regional media can

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4 This explanatory memorandum is based on the contribution prepared by Prof. Ágnes Gulyás, Professor in Media and Communications, School of Creative Arts and Industries at Canterbury Christ Church University, United Kingdom. The written contribution is available from the Secretariat upon request.
5 How we know journalism is good for democracy

also play a role in diminishing the risk of fake news and disinformation about local government or elected officials or investigate rumours and provide local officials with a platform to provide further information.

9. Whether national, regional or local, the media contribute to consolidating a certain counter-power in the political system at all levels of governance, sometimes being referred to as the fourth estate. Indeed, they also serve a watchdog function by holding in particular elected officials accountable for the outcomes of the decisions they have taken and the policies they have put in place. In democratic societies, accountability is a condition for legitimacy. Strong local media that inform citizens of local authorities' actions thus not only serve as avenues for information and discussion but are also crucial actors in upholding the legitimacy of and therefore trust in subnational authorities and elected officials. Furthermore, the decline of local and regional media and the emergence of so-called media deserts have already been linked to lower turn-out at local elections and greater polarization.[6] Supporting the continued existence of strong, independent subnational media, can thus contribute to the representativity and legitimacy of local and regional councils.

10. Considering the above, the present report aims at providing guidance to local and regional authorities on how to tackle the decline of local and regional media. It will explore the growing trend towards media deserts in European towns and regions, their impact on democracy, and the role of local and regional authorities in combating such phenomena. To gather input for this report, the Congress' Current Affairs Committee held exchanges of views with experts, including regional journalists, academic experts and practitioners, and gathered input from its members via written and oral questions.

11. This report will first outline the main types and characteristics of subnational media as well as their role in safeguarding democracy and fostering community, before examining the key challenges they face in the current context. It will then present existing policy and support initiatives at European, national, regional and local levels and present good practices of how different actors can address the challenges faced by local and regional media. In conclusion, it will provide recommendations to local, regional and national authorities to support strong and independent subnational media.

12. This report is in line with Congress 2021-2026 Priority b, Democratic societies: quality of representative democracy and citizen participation, stating that independent media and the provision of correct information to all citizens are crucial for the quality of representative democracy. As a contribution to the Council of Europe campaign for the Safety of Journalists (2023-2027),[7] this report will also address the issue of the safety of journalists covering local and regional affairs which is closely linked to the situation of subnational media.

2. UNDERSTANDING LOCAL AND REGIONAL MEDIA

13. There is no comprehensive definition of local and regional media, as their forms and interpretations vary between countries depending on their particular histories, political systems, social and media cultures as well as economic development. However, they are part of subnational media, which can be defined as media divisions or entities that occur within a geographical area that is smaller than the nation-state. Thus, a defining feature of local and regional media is their spatial dimension, which revolves around a distinct geographical location and the communities within its boundaries. Importantly, the societal functions of local and regional media are also defining features as these types of media are intricately intertwined with the sense of place and contribute to the overall fabric of the lives of the communities they serve. Therefore, to understand local and regional media, both their spatial and societal dimensions need to be considered.

14. Although there are significant differences in the shape and form of local and regional media between countries, in most European states three main subnational media sectors can be observed, that vary in terms of size, dominant organisational purpose, media form, geographical coverage and content. These sectors are local news media, local and regional broadcasting, and community media. It is important to note that the size of a country plays a crucial role in determining the scope and scale of its subnational media landscape. For example, in the case of small countries such as Luxembourg or Malta, subnational media is limited and intertwined within national media structures. It is also important to note that the three subnational sectors have emerged at different historical periods, on

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6 Baekgaard, Martin, Carsten Jensen, Peter Bjerre Mortensen and Søren Serritzlew (2014). 'Local News Media and Voter Turnout, Local Government Studies, 40 (4): 518-53
7 Campaign for the Safety of Journalists - Freedom of Expression (coe.int)

different platforms and with different purposes. One of the implications of this is that policies and regulations as well as professional practices and codes vary greatly between the sectors. A further implication is that countries do not have comprehensive subnational media policies, which led to certain blind spots in policy initiatives, particularly concerning new forms of local and regional media. In addition, there is also a lack of comprehensive data for the subnational media sector as a whole, which is problematic because it hampers the understanding of the changes in the sector and the evaluation of policies.

15. Firstly, the local news media sector is fragmented into two main categories: legacy local news outlets and digital native provisions. As the sector name suggests these operations' primary purpose is to provide news for a particular locality. Legacy local newspapers have traditionally held a dominant position in the local media landscape in many European countries, often representing the oldest form of news media, particularly in mature democracies. The legacy news section is still the largest subnational media sector in many countries in terms of market size and audience reach with hundreds and in some larger states over a thousand titles. Most legacy news outlets are commercial operations having both political and social roles as well as profit-making objectives. This is a sector however that has gone through significant changes in the last two decades due to digital transformation and the emerging online communicative environment. Key aspects of the changes have been that outlets have shifted towards providing content online, and there has been a sharp decline in the circulation of traditional print newspapers. In parallel, the traditional business model, which relied on advertising revenues and print sales, has been undermined leading to a more volatile and uncertain market environment.[8] Digital technologies, however, have also enabled new players and new forms of local news media to emerge. Indeed, a whole new subsector of digital native providers has arisen which predominantly offer local news online. Terminology about this subsector varies as they cover different types of providers and there are frequent changes of outlets. Typically, they are independent players with less corporate influence often focusing on smaller geographical areas than legacy local newspapers. For that reason, they are also referred to as hyperlocal provisions.[9] Organisational purposes vary, some providers are commercial, while some are non-profit. The subsector has a mixed economy relying on different financial resources, but overall this is also a volatile and uncertain market environment.

16. The second main subnational media sector is local and regional broadcasting, which includes both radio and television. These provisions typically offer a mix of content, with varying ratios of news across different outlets. Public service broadcasters play a key role in subnational broadcasting, given the strong tradition of public service media in many European countries. Due to its public service remit and broadcasting history, this sector is subject to more extensive regulations compared to the local news media sector. These regulations encompass aspects such as licencing, access, ownership, and content, reflecting a higher level of oversight and control. In many European countries, the dominant form of subnational television is regional, covering larger geographical areas often defined in terms of administrative political units, such as federal states, provinces or counties. As such they often reach larger audiences compared to local newspapers or local digital news outlets, but they are more removed from specific communities as they offer less content about particular localities. Alongside public service providers, there are also commercial outlets in a number of countries, especially larger ones with economies of scale, that offer either regional or local services. Interestingly, in a few countries local authorities run their own local television service as part of their communication strategy. Subnational radio follows a similar pattern to television in terms of overall structure, but typically there are more local services and more commercial players.

17. The third main subnational media sector is community media, which is the smallest sector in size but with distinctive characteristics. From an international perspective, community media are defined variedly, but in a European context, it refers to a media form that is run for the community, about the community and by the community.[10] As such these are non-profit operations which are seen as 'third sector' type provisions. Importantly, community in this context is interpreted broadly, and it can refer to a community in a specific geographical location or a community of interest based on shared identity or experience. Community media tend to take radio format, partly because it has found recognition within

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8 Hess, K. and Waller, L. (2016) Local Journalism in a Digital World: Theory and Practice in the Digital Age, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
9 Harte, D., Howells, R., and Williams, A. (2018). Hyperlocal Journalism The decline of local newspapers and the rise of online community news. Routledge.
10 Peissl, H., Purkarthofer, J., Bellardi, N. and Scifo, S. (2022) Community Media contributions to citizens' participation, Council of Europe, https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/community-media

audio-visual legislation, but in recent years there has been an increase in outlets operating online.[11] Similarly to subnational broadcasting, these provisions typically offer a mix of content depending on the interest of the community they serve. Another distinctive characteristic of community media is that they are usually operated by volunteers rather than professional journalists who receive wages. There are significant differences between European countries in relation to legal status, types, size and vitality of community media. There are a number of countries where community media are not recognised legally, which can hamper media access for minorities.[12] Another challenge for community media is precarious financial conditions as many organisations rely on short-term often project-based funding from state or non-state grant providers.[13]

3.   THE ROLE OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL MEDIA IN SAFEGUARDING DEMOCRACY AND FOSTERING COMMUNITY

18.   The key roles of local and regional media are political, socio-cultural, and in the case of commercial operations business functions. Local and regional media play a crucial role in upholding democracy at the local level and fostering the communities they serve. Their impact is so substantial that arguably they represent a 'merit good', a term suggesting that such good should be provided irrespective of consumption habits.[14]

19. Local media, with their distinct connection to the community, serve vital socio-cultural functions which include:

- *Fostering Community Cohesion*: Local media platforms play a crucial role in fostering community cohesion by serving as a common information source and facilitating communication among community members. They bring people together, disseminate information about local events, initiatives, and issues, and provide a platform for dialogue and interaction. Through their reporting and coverage, they contribute to creating a sense of unity, shared experiences, and collective identity within the community. Local media can serve as powerful tools for promoting intercultural and intergenerational understanding. By providing platforms that showcase the cultural richness and diversity of the community, local media can break down stereotypes, encourage dialogue, and foster empathy among residents. By featuring the voices of residents, local media can also empower individuals and marginalised groups, giving them a sense of agency and representation in the public sphere. For example, local media can facilitate the integration of migrants into their new communities through cultural exchange, raising awareness about the challenges and opportunities they face, providing opportunities to voice their opinions, concerns, and aspirations, and combating stereotypes.

- *Underpinning Local Identity*: Local media outlets play a fundamental role in underpinning local identity by highlighting and promoting the unique characteristics, values, and traditions of the community they serve. Through their storytelling and coverage of local events, customs, and people, they help shape and reinforce the collective identity of the community, fostering a sense of pride and belonging among its members. By covering local issues and events that affect the community as a whole, local media can create a sense of belonging and solidarity among residents.

- *Recording and Preserving Local History and Culture*: Local media serves as an important medium for recording and preserving local history and culture. Through their news reporting, features, interviews, and archival content, they document significant events, milestones, and cultural practices within the community. This historical and cultural preservation contributes to the

11 Gulyas, A. (2023 forthcoming) Local and community media in EU member states and five candidate countries (Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey) – an international comparative analysis conducted using Media Pluralism Monitor data from 2020-2023. Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, European University Institute.
12 Bleyer-Simon, K., Brogi, E., Carlini, R., Da Costa, D., Borges, L., Nenadic, I., Palmer, M., Parcu, P.L., Trevisan, M., Verza, S. and Zuffova, M. (2022) Monitoring Media Pluralism In The Digital Era, Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the year 2021; Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, European University Institute.
13 Peissl, H., Purkarthofer, J., Bellardi, N. and Scifo, S. (2022) Community Media contributions to citizens' participation, Council of Europe, https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/community-media
14 Ali, C. (2016) The Merits of Merit Goods: Local Journalism and Public Policy in a Time of Austerity. Journal of Information Policy, 6, pp.105–128.

collective memory of the community, ensuring that local heritage and traditions are acknowledged, celebrated, and passed down to future generations.

20.   In terms of their political roles,[15] local and regional media play a crucial role in safeguarding democracy through various functions:

- *Informing citizens*: Local and regional media serve as primary sources of information about the locality, catering to the critical information needs of communities. They report on local news, events, and issues, providing residents with essential information to make informed decisions and participate in civic life. Providing information at times of local elections is a particularly important role of local and regional media. Research has demonstrated that the quality and quantity of information presented by local media during these periods significantly influence the level of engagement and involvement of the electorate.[16]

- *Educating as to the meaning and significance of facts*: Local media outlets help educate citizens on the meaning and significance of facts by providing context, analysis, and interpretation of current affairs. They help bridge the gap between complex issues and the general public, enhancing civic literacy and understanding. This education role also involves contributions from local journalists to media literacy initiatives. In many countries, local media organisations are actively involved in media literacy programmes for children and young people, often in collaboration with local educational institutions and local, regional or national governments. For example, in Finland the Association of News Publishers produces critical media literacy materials, organises campaigns and works with schools to enhance media education learning.[17]

- *Providing a platform for public debate and discussion*: Local and regional media create platforms for public debate and discussion, facilitating dialogue among community members and providing space for diverse voices to be heard. They host public forums, publish opinion pieces, and engage in investigative journalism that promotes informed discourse on important local issues.

- *Holding elected officials and those in power to account*: In a healthy democracy, the press acts as "counter-power" to the state and is indispensable in holding power accountable as well as informing citizens about government's actions. As such, if local democracy is the cornerstone of democratic societies, local media are key actors, at the very core of ensuring political accountability and strengthening of democratic values. Local media play a sentinel role in ensuring that elected officials, government institutions, and other influential figures in the community are held accountable. Through investigative reporting, uncovering corruption, and exposing wrongdoing, they help ensure transparency and integrity in local governance.

- *Providing a diversity of viewpoints*: Local and regional media outlets strive to offer a diversity of viewpoints and perspectives. They provide platforms for different voices, fostering inclusivity and democratic pluralism.

- *Acting as 'keystone media' underpinning the national news ecosystem.*[18] They generate news stories, content, and local insights that are often picked up by national media, contributing to a broader understanding of the country's social, economic, and political landscape.

21.   The ability of local and regional media to fulfil these ideal roles, however, depends on the political, economic, and socio-cultural context they inhabit.

22.   Serving the critical information needs of communities is a particularly important role of local and regional media. The notion of critical information needs originates from the US, where it is adopted by the Federal Communications Commission, to assess how the quality of local media content meets the needs of their communities. To define: "Critical information needs of local communities are those forms of information that are necessary for citizens and community members to live safe and healthy lives, to

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15 Adapted from McNair, B. (1995) Introduction to Political Communication, Routledge, 2nd edition.
16 Jonathan Parker (2023): Regional media and non-statewide party voting in Europe, In: Regional & Federal Studies, DOI: 10.1080/13597566.2023.2189240
17 Chapman, M., & Oermann, M. (2020). Supporting quality journalism through media and information literacy. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
18 Nielsen, R.N. (2015) Local Journalism: The Decline of Newspapers and the Rise of Digital Media, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

have full access to educational, employment, and business opportunities, and to fully participate in the civic and democratic lives of their communities should they choose." To meet these needs, communities need access to the following eight categories of essential information, in a timely manner, in an interpretable language, and via media that are reasonably accessible, including information about: 1. Emergencies and risks. 2. Health. 3. Education. 4. Transportation systems. 5. Environment and planning. 6. Economic development. 7. Civic information. 8. Political life.[19]

23.   To fulfil the democratic functions listed above, local and regional media must be independent. This independence partly depends on the legal and regulatory frameworks in the country, and partly on the levels of threats to editorial autonomy.

24.   In terms of legal and regulatory frameworks, aspects such as media ownership rules can impact editorial diversity and independence. Access to public information laws play a crucial role in ensuring transparency and accountability, which are vital for independent journalism. Freedom of expression laws safeguard the right to express opinions without censorship or undue interference. Licensing requirements can also affect the entry barriers for media outlets, potentially impacting their independence.

25.   In relation to editorial autonomy, several factors pose potential threats to local and regional media. Concentrated media ownership can exert influence and limit the diversity of voices and perspectives. Undue influence by local authorities or politicians over media outlets can compromise journalistic independence and editorial decision-making. Economic pressures, such as heavy reliance on sole or just a few large commercial or state advertisers, can create dependencies and impact editorial independence. The safety and security of journalists are also critical factors, as threats, attacks, or harassment can have a chilling effect, inhibiting their ability to report freely and independently. Furthermore, promoting media literacy among the audience is important to counter misinformation which in turn strengthens the independence of local and regional media.

26.   It is clear from the above, that strong local and regional media are more than mere channels of information. They are true actors in the strengthening and protection of local democracy and are indispensable in a pluralistic media landscape. As outlined by the Committee of Ministers, in the preamble of Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)1 on media pluralism and transparency of media ownership, media pluralism is a crucial corollary of the right to the freedom of expression, as guaranteed by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

27.   Council of Europe member States have a negative obligation to refrain from interfering in the right to freedom of expression or media freedom, except in the very limited circumstances provided for by the Convention. This negative obligation also applies to local and regional authorities, as shown through judgements of the European Court of Human Rights for example in the cases of *Ziembiński v. Poland* (no. 2), application no. 1799/07, judgment of 5 July 2016 and *Skudayeva v. Russia*, application no. 24014/07, judgment of 5 March 2019.

28.   States and all levels of government also have various positive obligations, such as to guarantee pluralism in the (audiovisual) media sector[20] and to ensure a safe and favourable environment for participation in public debate by everyone.[21] The European Court of Human Rights refers consistently to these positive obligations. It has spelt out that States should take appropriate (legislative) measures to ensure true or effective media pluralism in practice.[22]

29.   As such, creating fertile conditions for local and regional media to flourish and fully play their role, is a responsibility of all levels of government and it is an intrinsic part of the protection of the right to freedom of expression and of safeguarding human rights at local level. When fulfilling their obligations at the local and regional levels, authorities should fully take into account the nature of local and regional contexts in order to ensure that the right to freedom of expression and media freedom, are respected at all levels of governance.

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19 https://www.fcc.gov/news-events/blog/2012/07/25/review-literature-regarding-critical-information-needs-american-public
20 *Informationsverein Lentia and Others v. Austria*, 24 November 1993, Series A no. 276.
21 *Dink v. Turkey*, nos. 2668/07 and 4 others, 14 September 2010.
22 Manole *and Others v. Moldova*, no. 13936/02, ECHR 2009; *Centro Europa 7 S.r.l. and Di Stefano v. Italy* [GC], no. 38433/09, ECHR 2012.

4.   CHALLENGES FOR LOCAL AND REGIONAL MEDIA

4.1 Sustainability

30.   Financial sustainability is arguably the key challenge for local and regional media across Europe currently. It is difficult to assess the overall picture regarding the viability of the sector due to a lack of comprehensive data. However, most European countries have reported declining numbers of local news titles and circulation. For example, in Portugal the number of newspapers declined from 732 in 2010 to 403 in 2019, while their circulation dropped from 62.1 to 22.6 printed copies per inhabitant during the same period.[23] In the UK, more than 320 local titles closed between 2009 and 2019 while advertising revenues for local newspapers fell by about 70%.[24] Legacy local news outlets are often perceived to have experienced particularly difficult financial plight, but it is important to note that other subnational media sectors have also been affected. For example, digital native local news providers have experienced financial challenges, as a result, there is a significant turnover of titles in that sector. Local and regional television that are heavily dependent on advertising revenues have also been severely affected leading to the closures of stations in Albania for example,[25] and increasing market concentration in France.[26] Although there are differences between sectors and countries, in general, there are three key factors that undermine the financial sustainability of local and regional media: difficulty finding viable business models, increased competition particularly from large platforms, and vulnerability to economic downturns.

31.   First, local and regional media have struggled to establish a stable business model for the digital era. Local news outlets have relied on revenues from their print copies and advertising in the pre-digital era, both of which have declined significantly in the last two decades. Print circulation of local newspapers has plummeted as online news has become popular and news consumption patterns have changed. Despite the rise in online audiences for local and regional media, the majority of users are unwilling to pay for local news when accessed through digital platforms. Worryingly, a significant proportion of digital subscriptions that do exist go to just a few popular national news brands[27] undermining the position of local news outlets in the online environment. Local news sectors have been also disadvantaged in relation to advertising revenues. As advertising has shifted online it became to be dominated by large platforms, particularly Alphabet (Google) and Meta (Facebook). For example, in Ireland the two platform providers accounted for 84% of all online advertising revenues in 2020.[28] As these large platforms have captured a substantial portion of online advertising spending, local news outlets have struggled to compete and generate sustainable revenue streams.

32.   Second, local and regional media face fierce competition in the digital environment in relation to three aspects: advertising, distribution and attention. As mentioned above, large platforms dominate online advertising and local and regional media have little chance to compete with these powerful players. The dominant platforms also hold significant control over the distribution of online content through their news aggregation and algorithm systems. This control directly impacts the accessibility and discoverability of local news for audiences online. This level of influence can have profound implications for the reach and exposure of local news outlets, making it more challenging for them to gain visibility and engage audiences in the digital space. The online environment is also challenging for local and regional media because they compete with a huge range of providers and sources for the attention and 'eyeballs' of audiences. This heightened competition for attention further intensifies the struggle for local and regional media outlets to stand out in the crowded online space. This competition can take place between different types of subnational media. In the UK, for example, there has been

23 Fidalgo, J. (2021). Portugal : Impoverished media struggling for survival. In : [ed] Trappel, J. & Tomaz, T., The Media for Democracy Monitor 2021 : How Leading News Media Survive Digital Transformation (Vol. 1) (pp. 297–352) Gothenburg: Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.
24 https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/107659/html/#_ftn4
25 Voko, K. and Likmeta, B. (2022). Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the year 2021. Country report: Albania. Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom.
26 Rebillard, F. and Sklower, J. (2022). Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the year 2021. Country report: France. Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom.
27 Newman, N. with Fletcher, R., Eddy, K., Robertson, C.T. and Nielsen, R.K. (2023) Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023, Reuters Institute for the study of Journalism, Oxford.
28 Flynn, R. (2022). Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the year 2021. Country report: Ireland. Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom.

tension between commercial local news brands and the BBC over the latter's plan to expand its online local news coverage.[29]

33. But local media also need to compete with new non-journalistic forms of local information sources online for the attention of audiences. For example, Facebook residents' groups or neighbour groups on other platforms have become popular in recent years for local information, and although these do not provide professional local news content some members of the audience regard them as local news sources.[30] Indeed digital technologies have empowered audiences to become local information sources themselves by reporting and commenting on matters as they see in their communities. Digital platforms have broken down the historical separation between professional local journalistic content and citizens' reporting and commentary. With the rise of social media, blogs, and user-generated content, individuals now have the opportunity to participate directly in shaping the local news narrative, contributing diverse perspectives and firsthand accounts. Arguably, this engagement has democratised information dissemination, where the voices and experiences of community members can feature alongside professional journalistic content. However, it also necessitates critical media literacy skills to discern between facts and opinion, and between reliable and inaccurate information.

34. In addition, communication outputs from local authorities could also act as competition and undermine the position of independent professional local media. Digital technologies have greatly facilitated direct communication between local authorities and citizens. As a result, many local authorities have established their own websites, social media accounts, newsletters, and in some cases their own newspapers or television channels. Although these platforms enable local authorities to disseminate information as they please, they can present unfair competition for local media and can be seen as propaganda vehicles. Some countries have tried to address this issue. In the UK, for example, the government introduced a Publicity Code for Local Authorities which details rules about frequency, content and appearance of local authority publicity and requires them to be objective.[31]

35. The third factor that undermines the financial sustainability of local and regional media is their vulnerability to economic downturns, such as those experienced during the 2018 financial crisis or the Covid-19 pandemic. This is due partly to the limited resources many local media organisations have, and partly to the significant portion of the sector still relying on advertising revenues which decline naturally during times of economic crisis. Numerous countries have reported that local and regional media were among the hardest-hit sectors during the Covid-19 pandemic in comparison to other segments of the media industry. For example, in Portugal 27% of local and regional press owners and 44% of local radio operators reported revenue losses between 61 and 80%.[32]

4.2 Local news deserts

36. The issue of local news deserts has received increased attention in public discourse as well as policy debates in recent years. While there is no agreed definition of the term, it commonly refers to geographical areas or communities that suffer from scarcity or absence of news outlets and news coverage[33]. In short, it means places or communities without or with limited access to news about themselves. The concept of local news deserts highlights the issue of spatial disparities in both the provision and consumption of local news. It sheds light on the unequal distribution of news resources, where certain areas experience a significant lack of access to local news and information, exacerbating disparities between different communities. Although the concept itself is not new as there have always been inequalities in terms of news provisions and consumption between different localities, the issue has received increased attention because of the decline in the number of local newspapers and local news more broadly. Research about local news deserts is challenging because of the lack of comprehensive data about subnational media sectors, but evidence shows that disadvantaged communities are more likely to be affected by local news deserts. For example, a study on local news deserts in England demonstrates that communities in the lowest decile of indices of deprivation were nearly three times more likely to have no local newspaper than communities in more prosperous

29 https://pressgazette.co.uk/comment-analysis/bbc-local-publishers-ofcom-david-higgerson/
30 Gulyas, A., O'Hara, S. & Eilenberg, J. (2019) Experiencing Local News Online: Audience Practices and Perceptions, Journalism Studies, 20:13, 1846-1863.
31 https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/pre-election-period/code
32 Cadima, F.R.N., Baptisa, C., Da Silva, M. T. and Abreu, P. (2022). Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the year 2021. Country report: Portugal. Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom.
33 Usher, N. (2015) Does New Jersey have a 'media desert' problem? Columbia Journalism Review August 7 2015.

areas.[34] This is concerning because it indicates that no or limited access to local news could contribute to multiple deprivations of communities.

37.   Local news deserts are concerning because of their potential impacts, which include a deterioration in vibrancy and engagement in the local community, less efficient, unscrutinised local government; decline in citizens' civic engagement, less informed citizens and increased democratic deficit.[35] A particularly concerning impact of local news deserts and the decline of quality local media is that it can lead to the rise of fake news and misinformation in the community. When there is a lack of credible and reliable local news sources, it creates a void that can be exploited by providers of false or misleading information. This could mean that residents may lack access to reliable news, making them more susceptible to misinformation. In the absence of trustworthy local news sources, social media platforms and online forums may become the primary sources of information for some communities. These platforms are susceptible to the spread of misinformation and sensationalised content. Without credible local news outlets to counteract false narratives, misinformation can take hold and create confusion among community members. Disadvantaged communities, in particular, may be more vulnerable to the effects of fake news and misinformation, as they often have more limited access to alternative sources of information. The decline of local news media can also erode trust in media as a whole. When communities experience a lack of reliable local news coverage, they may become disillusioned with journalism in general, leading to a broader erosion of trust in the media industry.

4.3   Quality of local news content

38.   Another challenge in contemporary subnational media is the quality of local and regional journalism, particularly in relation to three key aspects. Firstly, there are concerns regarding the hollowing out of some local news titles. Such titles sometimes are referred to as 'ghost' or 'zombie' papers, where as a result of market consolidation, centralisation and financial constraints, staff and resources of the local title are reduced leading to less local content.[36] For example, coverage of local authorities and council meetings has declined in many countries, partly as a result of this process.

39.   Secondly, because of financial difficulties at many local media outlets, some local offices have closed. Physical offices of local news organisations had traditionally been an important landmark and anchored the outlet in its community. Losing the physical connection not only impacts the relationship between the journalists and the community, but also the effectiveness of the journalists to report on local matters and the quality of the content they produce.[37]

40.   Lastly, there are concerns about the extent to which local and regional journalism meets the critical information needs of their communities. There is limited empirical research in Europe about this issue, but in the US one study showed that out of a hundred randomly chosen communities, eight communities contained no stories addressing critical information needs, twelve communities contained no original news stories, and twenty communities contained no local news stories. Furthermore, just over half (56 percent) of the news stories provided by local media outlets addressed a critical information need.[38]

4.4   Independence of local and regional media

41.   As highlighted in the previous section of this report, the political independence of local and regional media is crucial for them to effectively fulfil their democratic functions and provide content that meets their communities' critical information needs. However, local media outlets can be more susceptible to political interference compared to their national counterparts due to factors such as more limited resources, lower visibility, and a distinct relationship with local politicians and authorities. There are significant variations between countries in terms of the levels of political independence of local and

34 Gulyas, A. (2021) Local news deserts. in: Reappraising Local and Community News in the UK: Media, Practice and Policy, Routledge.
35 Gulyas, A. 2021. Local news deserts. in: Reappraising Local and Community News in the UK: Media, Practice and Policy Routledge.
36 Abernathy, P. M. (2020). The expanding news desert. Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Assmann, K. (2023). Rise of the Zombie Papers: Infecting Germany's Local and Regional Public Media Ecosystem. Media and Communication, 11(3).
37 Barclay, S., Barnett, S., Moore, M., & Townend, J. (2022). Local news deserts in the UK: what effect is the decline in provision of local news and information having on communities. The Charitable Journalism Project.
38 Napoli, P. M., Weber, M., McCollough, K., & Wang, Q. (2018). Assessing local journalism. New Measures Research Project.

regional media. States with a long-standing tradition of local media, robust democratic institutions, and a media ecosystem that prioritises public service values and pluralism are generally successful in preventing direct political interference in local media. In some countries however local media are often part of the state propaganda system and under political control. In the Russian Federation, for example, local media are part of the power structure and are almost completely dependent on subsidies that are applied as control mechanisms. This means that local media are alienated from their local communities.[39] The independence of local and regional media is also under pressure in Council of Europe member States. For example, in Poland and Hungary the governments in recent years exerted their influence over local media via ownership with a state-owned firm gaining monopoly in the sector and via state advertising that is used to support preferred outlets.[40] In some other countries, for example in Slovakia, Serbia or Lithuania, the lack of transparency regarding ownership and state advertising at the local level means that local authorities could have a direct influence on editorial policies either via ownership or financial power, resulting in biased content.[41]

42. Even in countries with generally politically independent media, the editorial autonomy of local media can present challenges. For example, in Finland, a survey was conducted among editors-in-chief of local newspapers which revealed that 81.5% of respondents reported experiencing attempts by municipal decision-makers to influence the editorial content.[42] The political independence of local media can be complex due to the nature of relationships between local journalists and politicians. Unlike their counterparts in national-level media, local journalists often have closer and more intertwined relationships with local politicians, where personal and professional lives frequently overlap. They may share social spaces, have their children attending the same schools, or frequent the same shops. Integrity can be especially important when local journalists report on the policies and work of local politicians, who also happen to be the same individuals deciding on subsidy allocations to local media. Such social encounters and influences are challenging to regulate. However, implementing professional codes for both local journalists and individuals working in local authorities can serve as a useful tool in managing these relationships.[43] It is also important that any subsidies and support systems for local media administered by local politicians have clear and transparent criteria, and that its allocation is openly monitored and evaluated.

4.5 Conditions of local and regional journalism

43. There are three challenges related to local and regional journalism that are of concern: precarious working conditions, the safety of local and regional journalists, and limited resources to upskill and train journalists, especially regarding digital innovations.

44. First, local and regional journalists often grapple with precarious working conditions that are generally worse than for journalists working at the national level, and which can include job insecurity, perilous contracts, pressurised work, and unstable income and pension. There are variations among countries regarding the degree of precarious working conditions experienced by journalists at the subnational level. However, in general, countries with economically weaker sectors and less political independence tend to exhibit more unfavourable working conditions for local journalists.

39 Kiriya, I. (2020) Central and local media in Russia: between central control and local initiatives. In: The Routledge Companion to Local Media and Journalism, Routledge.

40 Klimkiewicz, B. (2022). Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the year 2021. Country report: Poland. Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom; and Batorfy, A., Bleyer-Simon, K., Szabó, K., and Galambosi, E. (2022). Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the year 2021. Country report: Hungary. Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom.

41 Urbanikova, M. (2022). Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the year 2021. Country report: Slovakia. Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom; and Balcytiene, A., Jastramskis, D., Juraite, K., Kalpokas, I. (2022). Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the year 2021. Country report: Lithuania. Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom.

42 Mantyoja, M. and Manninen, V. (2022). Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the year 2021. Country report: Finland. Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom.

43 Gulyas, A. (2023 forthcoming) Local and community media in EU member states and five candidate countries (Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey) – an international comparative analysis conducted using Media Pluralism Monitor data from 2020-2023. Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, European University Institute.

45.   Second, ensuring the safety of local journalists is a pressing concern, as they may encounter threats, harassment, or even physical violence while covering sensitive issues. Safety concerns are perceived to have increased in recent years in parallel with heightened political pressure and greater polarisation in political culture in many countries. Indeed, the Safety of Journalists Platform has reported increases in Europe in almost all their safety categories, particularly in relation to the number of harassment and intimidation of journalists (which rose from 43 to 94 between 2019 and 2022) and attacks on physical safety and integrity of journalists (which rose from 33 to 74 between 2019 and 2022). Local journalists are particularly at risk, partly because they often have less public visibility, and partly because of the close proximity to the potential source of harm. Several alerts submitted to the Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists of the Council of Europe concern serious safety incidents involving local journalists in various countries. For example, Turkish journalists Gungor Arslan who was the publisher and news editor of the local news site Ses Kocaeli was killed in 2022 following his story of corruption involving the local mayor. While local journalist Morgan Large at the Radio Kreiz Breizh in France, who is known for her investigations into the agriculture sector in the Brittany region, has received a number of threats and her car was sabotaged. And Serbian journalist Dragan Marinovic, the editor-in-chief of Resetka from Leskovac, was threatened with death because of a story he had published.[44] Safety concerns about local journalists are a significant problem because it is a threat to press freedom, it can impact the information journalists produce, the intimidation and harassment can affect journalists' well-being and can lead to self-censorship, and it can erode the public trust in local media. Addressing the safety of local journalists is essential for upholding press freedom, promoting informed civic discourse, and ensuring that communities have access to accurate and reliable information.

46.   Third, the rapidly changing media landscape necessitates that local and regional journalists develop new skillsets to effectively adopt digital innovations and navigate the digital platforms where news is increasingly consumed. However, local and regional media organisations often have limited resources to train and upskill journalists, further undermining their position in the digital environment.

5.   POLICY AND SUPPORT INITIATIVES FOR LOCAL AND REGIONAL MEDIA

5.1   International organisations

5.1.1   Council of Europe

47.   The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has addressed several issues relating to local and regional media. These issues can be categorised into three overarching themes: safety of journalists, media pluralism, and quality journalism. Firstly, the Committee of Ministers has issued a Declaration[45] and Recommendation[46] on the protection of journalism and the safety of journalists. The Recommendation serves as the benchmark text for journalist safety in Europe, providing detailed guidelines for member states on prevention, protection, prosecution, and promotion of information and education. While the Recommendation does not specifically address local and regional media, it applies to all levels of journalism. Additionally, the Council of Europe established a Platform to promote the protection of journalism and the safety of journalists in 2015.[47] This platform, managed by NGO partners, raises alerts about threats to journalists and media freedom in Europe. National authorities are encouraged to respond to these alerts, which are categorised based on severity and cover various threats, including those at the local and regional levels.

48.   Secondly, the mainstay of the Committee of Ministers' recent standard-setting work on media pluralism is a Recommendation on media pluralism and transparency of media ownership.[48] The Recommendation recalls the importance of local content (Preamble, para. 4) and of "the diversity of interests and viewpoints relevant to local and regional communities" (Guidelines, para. 2.2). It calls on States to "encourage and support the establishment and functioning of minority, regional, local and

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44 https://fom.coe.int/en/accueil
45 Declaration of the Committee of Ministers on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors, 30 April 2014.
46 Recommendation CM/Rec(2016)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors, 13 April 2016.
47 http://www.coe.int/en/web/media-freedom
48 Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)1 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on media pluralism and transparency of media ownership, 7 March 2018.

not-for-profit community media, including by providing financial mechanisms to foster their development" (Guidelines, para. 2.11). These are identified as ways to give voice to such communities and facilitate their participation in media-related processes and dialogue. The Recommendation also underscores the importance of transparency of media ownership at the regional and local levels (Guidelines, para. 4.8).

49.   Thirdly, in respect to quality journalism, the Committee of Ministers has adopted two leading texts, focusing on financial aspects and more general aspects. In its Declaration on the financial sustainability of quality journalism in the digital age,[49] the Committee of Ministers gives a stark synopsis of the financial challenges faced by the media in general and local media in particular, and stresses that there is "a need to develop and strengthen public policy measures at European, as well as at local levels to ensure that community media, as well as other types of media serving local and rural communities, have financial and legal resources and space to operate on all distribution platforms" (para. 12). It encourages member States to adopt a variety of measures, including a beneficial tax regime for the production and distribution of journalistic content; financial support schemes for media sectors besides public service media, in particular for regional, local, hyperlocal and not-for-profit community media; fostering private-public partnerships aimed at (i) supporting investigative journalism, (ii) developing viable business models for hyperlocal journalism and freelance journalists, (iii) supporting the transition of printed publications to the digital environment, (iv) building a digital presence for small, particularly local media outlets, (v) developing journalistic skills and training and media literacy programmes for newsrooms, (vi) strengthening journalistic ethics and principles such as fact-checking or reflecting a plurality of views present in society, (vii) encouraging and promoting careers in journalism, (viii) developing business skills of media practitioners adapted to the digital economy, including skills for audience measurement and analysis, or (ix) supporting the development of new technologies for newsrooms.

50.   The Committee of Ministers' Recommendation on promoting a favourable environment for quality journalism in the digital age[50] also paints a bleak picture of the current plight of local and regional media and journalism: "Local journalism has been especially hard hit by the new economic fundamentals and is on the verge of disappearing entirely in many places, stripping communities of crucial watchdogs over local governments and public affairs." (Guidelines, para. 12). States should accordingly pay "particular attention" to the situation of local journalism when assessing the need for, and/or developing, measures to ensure "the financial sustainability of quality journalism as a public good" (Guidelines, para. 1.1.2). As for the sustainability of quality journalism, the Recommendation underlines the importance of training opportunities for, and the "upskilling" of, media professionals. It thus calls for "[a]dequate training and retraining opportunities [to] be made available to journalists, including those working in lesser-used and minority languages and/or local and regional communities" (Guidelines, para. 3.2.3).

51.   Across its various Resolutions and Recommendations, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has shown itself to be attentive to specifically local and regional angles to themes such as the safety and protection of journalists;[51] the independence of the media;[52] trust and the public's right to know;[53] and the role of the media in responding to and overcoming crises.[54] In this Resolution, "The role of the media in times of crisis", the Assembly provides useful insights into the general relationship between the media and public authorities and leaders.

5.1.2 European Union

52.   Local and regional media matters are addressed by generic EU media regulation and support systems. The main EU media legislations, such as the Audiovisual Media Services Directive or the proposed European Media Freedom Act, do not have specific provisions for local and regional media. Arguably a weakness of both national and international media regulation is that they tend to focus on national-level media while somewhat neglecting the specificity of subnational media. However, interest

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49 Declaration by the Committee of Ministers on the financial sustainability of quality journalism in the digital age, 13 February 2019.
50 Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on promoting a favourable environment for quality journalism in the digital age, 17 March 2022.
51 PACE Resolution 2141 (2017), 'Attacks against journalists and media freedom in Europe', 24 January 2017.
52 PACE Resolution 2179 (2017) and Recommendation 2111 (2017), Political influence over independent media and journalists, 29 June 2017.
53 PACE Resolution 2382 (2021) and Recommendation 2204 (2021), Media freedom, public trust and the people's right to know, 22 June 2021.
54 PACE Resolution 2419 (2022), The role of the media in times of crisis, 25 January 2022.

in local and regional media issues has increased in recent years, and the EU has supported a number of initiatives that directly or indirectly address the needs of local and regional media. For example, the Media Pluralism Monitor, which is funded by the EU and run by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, EUI, Florence, includes in its analysis local and regional media dimensions and their relevance for overall media pluralism.[55] In addition, the EU's Action Plan for Democracy and Media and Audiovisual Action Plan contain relevant provisions for local and regional media. The European Commission is financing a new project to counter the emergence of news deserts in Europe: Local Media for Democracy.[56] The project's central objective is "to revive the local media landscape with measures to build resilience, independence, and sustainability by improving their capacity in innovation, business strategies, and audience engagement". This 18-month project is run by a consortium of partners: the European Federation of Journalists, the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, International Media Support and Journalismfund Europe.

5.1.3 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

53. At the OSCE level the most relevant policy development in recent years has been the publication of the Tallinn Guidelines on National Minorities and the Media in the Digital Age in 2019. The Guidelines rest on four main thematic pillars: Enabling Environment for Freedom of Expression and Media Freedom; Media Environment; Pluralism and Diversity; and Media, Information Technologies and Conflict Prevention. As national minorities are often demographically concentrated at regional or local levels, numerous provisions in the guidelines are relevant for regional and local media that do not explicitly serve, or are not formally run by, national minority groups. Guideline 22 (under 'Pluralism and Diversity'), for instance, reads: "States should adopt specific legislative and other support measures to facilitate the independent and stable operation of a range of media at regional or local levels, including in geographical areas with national minority populations and/or in national minority languages."

5.2 Local, Regional and National Authorities

54. Both national governments and local and regional authorities have a role in setting policies and providing support in relation to local and regional media. National governments play a crucial role in establishing overarching aims and directions for media policies and interventions at a national level, while the extent of involvement and influence of local or regional authorities varies depending on the size and political structure of the country. In some cases, particularly in larger countries and federal states, local or regional authorities may have a significant role to play in shaping and implementing policies that directly affect local and regional media.

55. National governments generally lack comprehensive subnational media policies, which means that local and regional media are regulated under general or media-form specific legislation and initiatives. For instance, broadcasting-related regulations typically extend to local and regional broadcasting media outlets. Established local and regional media sectors are regulated and supported according to the governments' general media policies. Types and levels of support vary considerably between member states of the Council of Europe, influenced by the country's economic development, democratic traditions, public service media values and general media policies. However, emerging forms of local and regional media, such as digital native news outlets, are frequently overlooked in policy initiatives. In addition, the community media sector faces obstacles due to the absence of formal legal recognition in several countries.[57]

56. The support system for local and regional media can involve both direct subsidies and other forms of support either from the national government and/or local and regional authorities. Direct subsidies are not offered everywhere, for example in about a third of EU states local media do not receive such support.[58] The motivations behind government subsidies for local media also differ. For example in Scandinavian countries and France, the primary objective has been to uphold diversity and pluralism. The local press sector in these countries has been receiving direct subsidies with that aim for many

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55 https://cmpf.eui.eu/mpm2022-results/
56 https://cmpf.eui.eu/local-media-for-democracy-project/.
57 Peissl, H., Purkarthofer, J., Bellardi, N. and Scifo, S. (2022) Community Media contributions to citizens' participation, Council of Europe, https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/community-media
58 Bleyer-Simon, K., Brogi, E., Carlini, R., Da Costa, D., Borges, L., Nenadic, I., Palmer, M., Parcu, P.L., Trevisan, M., Verza, S. and Zuffova, M. (2022) Monitoring Media Pluralism In The Digital Era, Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the year 2021; Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, European University Institute.

years. In some countries, however, the subsidy to local media tends to be offered to those outlets that are close to the government. Direct subsidies are provided for different purposes, the main categories are for general operations, journalistic capacity, and innovation projects.[59]

57. In some countries, new subsidies were introduced to address the challenges local media have faced in recent years. For example, in response to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic the state of North-Rhine-Westphalia in Germany took the initiative to offer financial support specifically for local radio outlets[60], and in the Netherlands, the government established the Temporary Support Fund Local Information Provision to assist local media outlets.[61] There have also been some new initiatives to address the issue of emerging local news deserts. For example, in Sweden new media subsidies were introduced in 2019 with a specific focus on bolstering local journalism in areas that have insufficient or limited local news coverage.[62] Likewise, in the Netherlands a new funding scheme, Journalistieke Professionalisering Lokale Publieke Mediadiensten, was launched to boost the quantity and quality of local media in the country.[63] In addition, in Ireland the government has provided €6 million euro in 2023 for a combined Local Democracy Reporting Scheme and a Court Reporting Scheme to boost the coverage of court cases, council meetings and local politics. In some countries, local and regional authorities also provide direct subsidies to local and regional media. In France, for example, 22 out of 36 local television stations reported that subsidies from local governments constitute more than half of their revenues.[64] In Croatia, some local governments provide direct media subsidies for the production of broadcasting programmes that promote topics such as youth, culture, social inclusiveness, and gender equality.[65]

58. Subsidies are important to promote a diverse media landscape that serves the information needs of communities. However, it is crucial that these support mechanisms by local, regional or national governments have robust and transparent criteria to ensure that they benefit legitimate local news outlets. One of the challenges in implementing subsidies is distinguishing between genuine local news providers and fake or unscrupulous ones. In the digital age, where anyone can create an online profile and claim to be a local news source, establishing clear criteria can become complex. To address this issue, the criteria may: (1) require that the news outlet primarily covers news and events within the specific local community or region; (2) set benchmarks for journalistic quality, ethics, and editorial independence; (3) evaluate the news outlet's use of reliable sources and fact-checking procedures to ascertain the accuracy and credibility of their content; (4) consider the news outlet's track record and reputation within the community and among peers in the media industry; (5) assess the extent of engagement with the local community and the outlet's contribution to the community. To establish a fair and effective system, governments may involve independent media experts, journalism associations, and community representatives in developing and implementing the criteria.

59. Apart from direct subsidies, governments also provide indirect support to local media, although the form and extent of this support vary greatly. Typically, these measures aim to reduce the operational costs for media organisations and are applied at both national and subnational levels, without specifically targeting local media. For instance, countries such as Austria, Germany, Italy, Spain, France, Albania, Poland, and Croatia have implemented reduced VAT rates for print or broadcasting operations, or both, which directly impact regional and local media operations. State advertising is another means by which national and subnational governments can support local and regional media.

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59 Lavender, T., Wilkinson, L., Ramsay, G., Stouli, S., Adshead, S., & Chan, Y. S. (2020). Research into recent dynamics of the press sector in the UK and globally. London: Plum Consulting.
60 Holznagel, B. and Kalbhenn, J. C. (2022) Monitoring Media Pluralism In The Digital Era Application Of The Media Pluralism Monitor In The European Union, Albania, Montenegro, The Republic Of North Macedonia, Serbia & Turkey In The Year 2021; Country Report: Germany; Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom.
61 De Swert, K., Schuck, A. and Boukes, M. (2022) Monitoring Media Pluralism In The Digital Era Application Of The Media Pluralism Monitor In The European Union, Albania, Montenegro, The Republic Of North Macedonia, Serbia & Turkey In The Year 2021; Country Report: the Netherlands; Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom.
62 Färdigh, M. A. (2022). Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the year 2021. Country report: Sweden. Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom.
63 De Swert, K., Schuck, A. and Boukes, M. (2022) Monitoring Media Pluralism In The Digital Era Application Of The Media Pluralism Monitor In The European Union, Albania, Montenegro, The Republic Of North Macedonia, Serbia & Turkey In The Year 2021; Country Report: the Netherlands; Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom.
64 Rebillard, F. and Sklower, J. (2022). Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the year 2021. Country report: France. Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom.
65 Bilic, P., Valecic, M., and Prug, T. (2022) Monitoring Media Pluralism In The Digital Era Application Of The Media Pluralism Monitor In The European Union, Albania, Montenegro, The Republic Of North Macedonia, Serbia & Turkey In The Year 2021; Country Report: Croatia; Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom.

However, state advertising can be problematic because of the lack of or limited regulations and transparency in many countries.[66] To ensure that state advertising support contributes to pluralism and diversity in the media it is important that the allocation process is transparent, there are inclusive eligibility criteria, and that the system is monitored and evaluated.

5.3 Non-state actors

60. Non-state actors also provide subsidies and support to local media, for example, funding schemes of NGOs or international bodies, private donors and corporate players, or support from professional and journalistic organisations. There are significant variations between countries in terms of the type of actors and extent of support. In addition, it is common to find that the support offered has a broader scope and is not specifically aimed at local and regional media. Below are some examples of initiatives at European level:

- European Journalism COVID-19 Support Fund: This initiative was launched in 2020 by the European Journalism Centre and the Facebook Journalism Project to provide financial assistance to local and regional news organisations impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It offered grants to support their operations during the pandemic.

- Open Society Foundations: Open Society Foundations support various media-related initiatives across Europe, including those focused on local and regional media. They provide funding for media development programs, training for journalists, and initiatives to strengthen media freedom and pluralism.

- Amplify Europe is an initiative run by the Media Development Investment Fund and funded by the Dutch Postcode Lottery and the German Postcode Lottery. It aims to support the sustainability of promising independent digital media companies from selected European countries. It provides tailored mentoring, capacity building and targeted grants.[67]

- The two large platforms, Alphabet (Google) and Meta (Facebook) have run their own initiatives to support journalism, and some projects have focused on local journalism. For example, Meta runs a journalism project accelerator programme that aims to help local news publishers to build a sustainable future.[68] Google set up its Google News Initiative in 2018 which provides training, resources and innovation fund.[69] Although these initiatives have had some useful outcomes, it is worthwhile to note that they have not significantly contributed to addressing the challenges of local and regional media that were partly caused by the platforms themselves.

6. BEST PRACTICES

6.1 Sustainability

61. Transparent and comprehensive subsidy systems that cover all forms of local and regional media and are tailored to their specific needs are required to address the challenges the sectors are facing. One positive example of this is the Netherlands where different levels of government offer support to the sector. The central government provides financial assistance through different subsidy programmes. One of the main schemes is the Dutch Journalism Fund *(Stimuleringsfonds voor de Journalistiek)*, which aims to stimulate the quality, diversity and independence of journalism, with a focus on enhancing the viability and relevance of local media.[70] The Fund is financed by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, but to ensure its autonomy it was set up as an independent body. Furthermore, local municipalities in the Netherlands may also offer their own subsidies and support programmes for local media. These initiatives vary from one municipality to another and can include

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66 Bleyer-Simon, K., Brogi, E., Carlini, R., Da Costa, D., Borges, L., Nenadic, I., Palmer, M., Parcu, P.L., Trevisan, M., Verza, S. and Zuffova, M. (2022) Monitoring Media Pluralism In The Digital Era, Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the year 2021; Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, European University Institute.
67 https://www.mdif.org/our-work/initiatives/amplify-europe/
68 https://www.facebook.com/formedia/mjp/programs/global-accelerator
69 https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/
70 https://www.svdj.nl/over-svdj/

direct financial assistance, in-kind support, or collaborative projects to strengthen local journalism and media outlets within their respective communities. In response to varying levels of local government support, the Dutch government recently announced a substantial increase in funding for local public broadcasting, as well as a new funding system for sector.[71] This involves more than 15.9 million euros to support the professionalisation of local public broadcasters, and this amount will rise to 18.9 million euros in 2024. Furthermore, from 2025, local broadcasters will receive direct funding from the central Dutch government instead of municipalities. This gives broadcasters long-term certainty about their financing and a more independent position in relation to municipalities.

62.   Sustainability of local media could be strengthened by setting up alternative organisational forms. One such example are the new 'solidarity press companies' (*entreprises de presse solidaire*) in France. These operate under a specific legal framework designed to promote democratic governance and social responsibility in the media sector. Solidarity press companies are based on the principles of cooperative ownership and participatory decision-making. They are structured as cooperative enterprises where journalists, employees, audiences, and other stakeholders have the opportunity to become members and participate in the governance and decision-making processes of the organisation. This cooperative structure aims to ensure that media outlets serve the interests of their members, the local community, and broader public objectives. To be financially viable they may receive financial support through subscriptions, donations, public funding, or other sources. The legislation offers a tax deduction for donations. These companies are required to reinvest any profits into the media outlet or community projects rather than distributing them among members. One example of a solidarity press company that operates in local and regional media in France is Mediacités, which is a digital news outlet that focuses on investigative journalism and in-depth reporting at the local and regional level. Mediacités operates in multiple cities, including Lille, Lyon, Nantes, and Toulouse.[72] Their digital platform provides a space for local and regional news reporting, analysis, and engagement with the community.

63.   As discussed earlier, local media outlets are susceptible to economic downturns and financial crises. Recognising this vulnerability, providing financial support during such challenging periods can play a pivotal role in helping local media outlets weather the difficult circumstances and sustain their operations. An example of such support is the subsidy provided by some *Bundesländer* in Germany to assist local and regional broadcasters amid the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, in North Rhine-Westphalia, where 'the state government, local radio representatives, infrastructure providers and the North-Rhine Westphalia media authority agreed the '*Solidarpakt Lokalfunk'* (local radio solidarity pact) to cover the distribution costs for local radio stations for a three-month period.' In return, the *Verband Localer Rundfunk* and the *Verband der Betriebsgesellschaften* - respectively, the local broadcasters' union and the union of operating companies - promised that they would guarantee all jobs of editorial staff until the end of September 2020.[73]

64.   Encouraging innovations to find new sustainable business models is crucial for long term viability and vitality of local and regional media. Such solutions are context specific as audiences' ability and willingness to pay for content as well as the size and structure of local advertising vary significantly between countries. One example of a successful new business model is La Voz de Galicia, which is a legacy news outlet in Spain. After offering online content for free and trying to raise advertising revenues for the first two decades of this century the title introduced a reader revenue strategy in 2019. During the launch, *La Voz de Galicia* reached out to key stakeholders in their community, which boosted their take up with subscription reaching more than 20,000 by the end of 2020. The new strategy focuses on the interests and needs of its loyal audience base comprising producing quality content and reader focused distribution which includes a daily newsletter. The outlet uses freemium paywall which means that there are free and subscriber-only articles, allowing all users to discover some content.[74]

65.   Implementing media literacy initiatives that emphasise the significance of local news can enhance the recognition and understanding of local media among audiences. This, in turn, has the potential to address not only the sustainability concerns of the sector but also mitigate the emergence of local news deserts. Some projects run by CLEMI in France are examples of such initiatives. CLEMI is in charge of

71 https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/12/16/kabinet-geeft-in-2023-€-159-miljoen-aan-lokale-publieke-omroepen; IRIS 2023-2:1/12; see also IRIS 2020-6/7.
72 https://www.mediacites.fr/
73 IRIS 2020-7:1/24, https://merlin.obs.coe.int/article/8920
74 https://ipi.media/la-voz-de-galicia-a-reader-revenue-model-built-on-an-editor-centred-strategy/ and https://blog.poool.fr/best-paywall-examples/#:~:text=La%20Voz%20de%20Galicia&text=Le%20Voz%20de%20Galicia%20divides,a%20little%20gold%20'%2B'%20symbol.&text=Simple%2C%20but%20effective%2C%20the%20paywall,2%20payment%20offers%20for%20each.

media and information literacy in the French education system with a mission to train teachers and build children's citizenship skills regarding media and information literacy. CLEMI works with a network of academic coordinators and media partners to develop projects and actions for schools. One such project is the Bayeux Calvados-Normandy Award for War Correspondents which is a collaboration between Calvados Department, the Region of Normandy, the Ministry of Education, the CLEMI, UNHCR and *Ouest-France* newspaper, which is a regional title. The project involves different activities, including co-production of content by college students and local journalists, as well as students becoming local reporters for three days. By engaging in such hands-on experiences, students gain valuable insights into the world of journalism and actively contribute to the local media landscape. This project not only facilitates knowledge sharing and skill development but also nurtures a deeper understanding and appreciation for the work of local journalists among the participating students.

66. To combat the power of platforms in local and regional media ecosystems targeted legislation is needed that promotes a fair online environment. One such legislation was introduced in Germany by the Interstate Media Treaty (*Medienstaatsvertrag*) that could help to increase online visibility of local media. The legislation introduced specific provisions to facilitate the accessibility and discoverability of public value content. Section 83 para 2 stipulates that charges and rates must be set in a way that allow regional and local offerings to be distributed under adequate conditions.[75] Furthermore, section 84 para 4 and 5 privileges local and regional media in terms of access and discoverability on platforms[76].

6.2 Local news deserts

67. Subsidies could help to prevent local news deserts from emerging. An example of targeted support with this goal is a supplementary one-off grant to news media announced by the Finish government announced in 2023 with the aim to "ensure adequate regional and local media services and to prevent the emergence of news wastelands".[77] The subsidy is designed to offset the losses incurred by media operators and could be used to pay for local journalists' wages or freelancers' fees.

68. Similarly, in Sweden the government is planning to introduce a new support mechanism to address potential news deserts. The aim is to promote access to independent, high-quality local news media. A particular strength of this new subsidy is that takes a platform-neutral approach, in contrast with traditional subsidies that focused on one particular platform or media type, often disadvantaging new forms of local media. Two types of support are planned. General editorial support is for financing editorial activities of local news outlets that employ at least two journalists. Extended editorial support is for investments in journalism in areas with weak coverage or to news media that produce some (i.e., at least 25%) editorial content in one or more minority languages.[78]

69. Community media could play a crucial role in bridging local news gaps by offering different types of content, catering to the specific requirements of communities and involving audiences who typically do not use traditional local media.[79] For example, many community media aim to cater for young people, who are typically low users of traditional local and regional media. The Youth Radio Network in Scotland, for instance, aims to empower, teach and entertain young people, aged 13 to 25 years, through the power of music and digital technology.[80] In Slovenia, the volunteers and listeners of Radio Študent and Radio Marš are primarily young people, but the communities that are formed around the stations come from a more diverse age group.[81] At Radio 3FACH, a Swiss youth community radio station in Lucerne, all moderators are younger than 25 and all members of the management team are younger than 30, which ensures that the station remains relevant to its community.

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75 https://www.die-medienanstalten.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Rechtsgrundlagen/Gesetze_Staatsvertraege/Interstate_Media_Treaty_en.pdf
76 Holznagel, B. and Kalbhenn, J. C. (2022) Monitoring Media Pluralism In The Digital Era Application Of The Media Pluralism Monitor In The European Union, Albania, Montenegro, The Republic Of North Macedonia, Serbia & Turkey In The Year 2021; Country Report: Germany; Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom.
77 Finnish Ministry of Transport and Communications, 'Government issues a decree on media support', Press release, 23 March 2023: https://lvm.fi/en/-/government-issues-a-decree-on-media-support.
78   https://www.nordicom.gu.se/en/publications/mediesverige-2023
79 Peissl, H., Purkarthofer, J., Bellardi, N. and Scifo, S. (2022) Community Media contributions to citizens' participation, Council of Europe, https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/community-media
80 https://doit.life/organisation/601449/profile
81 Peissl, H., Purkarthofer, J., Bellardi, N. and Scifo, S. (2022) Community Media contributions to citizens' participation, Council of Europe, https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/community-media

6.3 Quality of local news content

70. Collaboration between public service broadcasters and commercial local media companies can address gaps in the provision of quality local political news. The Local Democracy Reporter (LDR) scheme is an initiative that aims to address the decline in local news coverage by supporting the reporting of local democracy issues in the United Kingdom. The scheme was launched in 2017 as a partnership between the BBC and the News Media Association. Under the LDR scheme, funded by the BBC, reporters are employed by local commercial news organisations but dedicated to covering local government and public institutions. These reporters focus on reporting on local council meetings, political decisions, and public services, aiming to provide in-depth coverage of local democracy issues. The scheme is intended to help fill the gaps in local news coverage that have emerged due to declining resources and shrinking newsrooms. By providing additional dedicated reporters, the LDR scheme aims to support the vital role of local journalism in holding local authorities accountable, fostering transparency, and empowering citizens to engage in local decision-making.

71. Producing quality local news that meets the critical information needs of communities requires resources that small providers often do not have access to. Bureau Local in the UK is an example of a collaborative initiative successfully producing quality local journalism through investigative reporting that underpins the democratic role of local media. Currently, the network has nearly 1,500 members who are journalists, technologists and members of the public, broke nearly 500 stories on topics such as domestic violence, environment and local power, and offers over 70 open resources on its website.[82]

72. Another example of a collaborative initiative that boosts the quality of local news content and provides critical information news is Lännen Media in Finland which was founded in 2014. Lännen Media is a joint news agency among 12 local newspapers, where a rotating slate of journalists produce news, background articles, features, theme pages, and analysis for the participating outlets.[83] As the companies faced similar economic challenges, the rationale behind the collaboration was to enhance efficiency and reduce costs while not sacrificing the quality of local news content.

6.4 Independence of local and regional media

73. Transparent professional guidance is key in managing relationships between local media and local government. In the United Kingdom, the Local Government Association has developed a Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. This code provides guidance to local authorities on how to engage with the media in a fair, transparent, and accountable manner. It covers various aspects of communication, including providing accurate and timely information, distinguishing between factual information and political statements, and avoiding undue influence or bias. Additionally, the National Union of Journalists, a professional organisation representing journalists in the UK, has published guidelines on local authority media relations. These guidelines highlight the importance of open and accessible communication between local authorities and the media, emphasizing the role of journalists in holding public bodies to account.

74. ABO Local Media Development Agency in Ukraine is an initiative that aims to support Soviet-era legacy local media to transition to independent and self-reliant operations. It supports a network of about 50 hyperlocal media located in small to medium towns in western Ukraine. An important aspect of ABO's efforts in revitalizing local media, previously reliant on funding from local governments, involves a shift in mindset and the establishment of closer, more trusting connections between these media outlets and the communities they cater to. In addition, ABO is enhancing the standard of local media by providing training and support to independent journalists. These initiatives collectively contribute to the transformation and improvement of the local media landscape in the country. ABO relies on foreign grants to operate.[84]

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82 https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/local
83 Jenkins, J., & Graves, D. (2019). Case studies in collaborative local journalism. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford.
84 Park, J. (2022) Local Media Survival Guide 2022; How Journalism Is Innovating To Find Sustainable Ways To Serve Local Communities Around The World And Fight Against Misinformation, International Press Institute.
Vienna, Austria.

75.   Nyugat.hu is a community interest group in Hungary which provides independent local news in the county of Vas. It is an online only outlet that has provided news for more than twenty years. It is the most popular news source in its county and the most popular independent local news provider in Hungary. It won numerous awards for its quality coverage and investigative journalism, including from the Transparency International Hungary Foundation and the National Association of Hungarian Journalists.[85] Journalists at Nyugat.hu also provide support and mentorship for other local news providers, and have recently set up a collaborative website that brings together local news from 12 different independent local media outlets.

6.5 Conditions of local and regional journalism

76.   One initiative that aims to improve the working conditions of local journalists is the "Media Freedom Rapid Response" (MFRR) project, which is a Europe-wide initiative that focuses on defending and supporting journalists' rights and safety, including those working at the local level. The MFRR project, which is co-funded by the European Commission, works through a network of partner organisations and experts to provide rapid response support to journalists facing threats, harassment, or legal challenges. It offers legal assistance, safety training, advocacy, and resources to ensure journalists can work in a secure and enabling environment.[86]

77. The European Journalism Centre (EJC) aims to support skills development for journalists, including local journalists. It is an independent nonprofit organisation based in the Netherlands that provides training, resources, and support to journalists across Europe. It aims to support, strengthen, and develop journalism. It offers various initiatives to foster professional development and enhance the skills of journalists, such as funding and journalism fellowships, free resources to further careers and enable innovative reporting, as well as running events to connect journalists across Europe.[87]

78.   Another initiative that fosters collaboration among local news outlets and offers training for local journalists is the Local cross-border investigative journalism project, which is financed by the European Commission, Transitions (Czech Republic), SSE Riga Centre for Media Studies (Latvia), the European Federation of Journalists (Belgium), and Journalismfund Europe (Belgium). The project aims to strengthen cross-border, local investigative journalism in Europe through three support mechanisms: (1) a grant programme which aims to address the shortage of local independent journalism in many countries; (2) a training programme for local journalists on different aspects of investigative journalism, local audience engagement and security; (3) a mini-MBA for local news media to foster innovative sustainable business and management models.

7.   CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

79.   In the following, final section, a set of recommendations is provided to address the challenges outlined in this report. It is important to emphasise, that achieving a thriving local and regional media environment requires cooperative and concerted efforts from various levels of government and stakeholders alike.

7.1 National governments

80. Comprehensive Data and Comparative Research: Governments and relevant organisations should invest in comprehensive data collection and comparative research to better understand the challenges faced by local and regional media. This research should include audience trends, revenue models, and the impact of platform dominance on local media ecosystems. It should also examine successful initiatives from different regions to identify best practices and potential solutions.

81. Comprehensive support system: Compared to national media, local and regional media are a more vulnerable sector financially. Governments should have comprehensive policies to ensure local and regional media fulfil their important political and societal roles. This should involve a transparent support

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85 https://www.nyugatmedia.org/en/cikk/nyugatmedia_org_introduction and https://magyarnarancs.hu/belpol/nem-halt-meg-a-videki-media-118817

86 https://www.mfrr.eu/

87 https://ejc.net/about

system with appropriate direct and indirect subsidies that address challenges in the subnational media ecosystem as a whole, promote innovation in the sector and foster quality local journalism.

82. Improving safety and working conditions of local journalists: Governments should develop initiatives to improve the safety and working conditions of local journalists, this may include safety training; legal protections; practical measures such as 24/7 hotlines and safe houses; assistance funds for those facing financial difficulties; training for law enforcement; public awareness campaigns; and monitoring and reporting mechanisms to track threats and advocate for policy improvements.

83. Policy Initiatives Addressing Platform Power: Governments should develop policy initiatives that specifically address the power of digital platforms and their impact on local and regional media. These initiatives should aim to create a level playing field, ensure that local news is visible and accessible online, and support the sustainability of local and regional media outlets.

84. Considerations for Local and Regional Media in Media Literacy Initiatives: Media literacy initiatives should include specific considerations for local and regional media, ensuring that citizens are equipped with the skills to critically evaluate and support local and regional news sources.

85. Transparency in Subsidies and Indirect Support: Governments should prioritise transparency in the allocation of subsidies and indirect support to local and regional media. Transparent processes will build trust, ensure fair allocation, and prevent undue influence over editorial independence.

86. Support Collaborative Initiatives: Governments should facilitate collaborative initiatives that address challenges or promote innovation in local and regional media. This can involve providing financial assistance, tax incentives, stakeholder engagement, knowledge exchange and capacity building, networking and partnership platforms. It is important to involve a variety of stakeholders, such as private providers, public media organisations, professional bodies, local authorities, universities, and schools.

87. Journalism Fellowships and Internship Programs: Governments should create journalism fellowships and internship programmes to attract and retain talented journalists in local communities and promote quality local journalism. These programmes can provide training and financial support to emerging journalists, encouraging them to pursue careers in local news reporting.

88. Broadband Access and Digital Inclusion: Address the digital divide by promoting affordable broadband access and digital literacy programmes. Ensuring that communities have access to high-speed internet and the skills to navigate digital platforms can help bridge local news gaps.

7.2 Local and regional authorities

89. Design and implement a support system for local and regional media that is transparent and has the public interest at its core: local media is in need of support, but the support system needs to aim to maintain the public benefit of a diverse and pluralistic local media ecology and facilitate civic and democratic engagement. As part of this, it is important to encourage the establishment and growth of nonprofit news organisations, community media outlets, and hyperlocal news initiatives. These organisations often have a strong community focus and can help fill the gaps left by declining commercial media.

90. Implement a professional code of practice regarding working with local media that promote transparency, openness and effective communication. As part of this consider the impact of direct communication and communication platforms of local authorities have on the sustainability of local news ecology. Allocation of state advertising should be transparent, fair and monitored regularly.

91. Promote collaborative journalism initiatives that foster partnerships between local news outlets, community organisations, schools, and academic institutions. Collaborations can pool resources, expertise, and audience reach to ensure comprehensive local news coverage.

92. Launch public awareness campaigns to highlight the importance of local news and the consequences of local news deserts. Engage community leaders, organisations, and residents to advocate for local news coverage and support local media outlets.

93. Create journalism fellowships and internship programmes to attract and retain talented journalists in local communities and promote quality local journalism. These programs can provide training and financial support to emerging journalists, encouraging them to pursue careers in local news reporting.