

EU-WESTERN BALKANS

MEDIA CONFERENCE 2022

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Summary of the Conference and Way Forward

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- First we need to put things in context and the EU-WB media conference takes place:
 - Russian' invasion of Ukraine, a threat to European safety and values, and democracy.
 - Post covid19 implications
 - Energy crisis and other social and economic major challenges that our societies are facing.
- In this troubling and challenging times, key important messages were reiterated yesterday by Michela Matuella, Acting Director Western Balkans at the European Commission and the EU Ambassador Christiane Hohmann, starting from the clear commitment to the EU membership perspective of the Western Balkans, highlighting important steps forward that have been made with:
 - the opening of accession to the EU for Albania and North Macedonia this summer, a long awaited breakthrough and
 - with the presentation of the Enlargement Package 2022, the Commission recommendation to grant candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina on the understanding that a number of steps are taken.
 - There are concrete achievements under the Common Regional Market as well as on the implementation of the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) making it easier to travel, to work and to study across the Western Balkans, a substantial energy support package of €1 billion in EU grants to help the Western Balkans addressing the energy transition as it was announced in the WB Summit as part of the Berlin Process.

- Now as Ms Matuella highlighted “Freedom of expression is a core European value and a prerequisite for accession and precisely it is also at the centre of the EU’s enlargement policy.
- The enlargement reports in the region unfortunately do not show much progress in terms of media freedom and freedom of expression across the region. Free and independent media are a key pillar of democracy in forming a public sphere, shaping public opinion and holding those in power to account (As Ambassador Hohmann underlined) and the EU’s message is clear: governments and relevant actors (regulatory bodies, public broadcasters and media owners) must step up their efforts to create an enabling environment for media freedom.
- So, where are we now? For sure global challenges on media sector and audiences’ behaviour and technology development and foreign interference in information environment affect the media ecosystem in the Western Balkans as well which on the other hand has limited capacities, resources, and infrastructure to cope and build resilience to such issues as we learned by our speakers in the first panel.
- More specifically, independent media faces **structural challenges embedded in the symbiotic and intersectional relation between media owners, business and politics** and as a result phenomena like **media capture** continue to hinder independent good quality journalism, also media ownership concentration and lack of transparency. Another major challenge is the concentration of public information and limited access to information due to lack of transparency and accountability of the public authorities making it hard for investigative journalists and fact checkers to do their job.
- Also, Independent media are under increased **financial pressure** also due to the impact of COVID19 and current crisis, while the development of quality professional journalism remains hampered by **precarious working conditions for journalists**, particularly young and women journalists. Journalists face threats on a daily basis in the region and we must understand **safety** as broadly as possible: it is not simply about physical safety, it is about having an enabling environment, the right incentives and conditions to do quality and professional journalism. The due process is limited and perpetrators are rarely brought to justice in the region.
- Media have also to cope and adapt to the **overwhelming technological and digital changes**, as we discussed about the impact of big tech, social media and AI on media operations, but also their relations to audiences and content production.
- As was highlighted in the first panel: **information manipulation and disinformation also fake news is not only a problem of the media and its content, but also a problem against society and democracy**. While people need quality and reliable information, to be able to play their role of informed citizens and exercise their democratic rights, we face an information environment contaminated by manipulation, disinformation and foreign

interferences which undermine further the already fragile democratic processes in the region. The EU is financing a large study in Albania regarding information manipulation and the results will be out soon.

- A combined approach is needed to address continuously both **quality and professional journalism and media and information and digital literacy**. The balance between supply and demand for good quality of content and information requires joint efforts in working with editorial boards, newsroom, journalists, media owners, regulatory bodies and so on on improving quality of content and professional journalism and in working with civil society, education institutions, libraries, cultural centres and so on strengthening media and information literacy. We all agreed that media and information literacy / digital literacy must become core competence among all citizens. As we heard today in the first panel: EDUCATION is key and JOURNALISTIC TRAINING that focuses on INTEGRITY.
- Is this the solution to addressing manipulation and foreign interferences in the information ecosystem in the region? – It is one of the long term investment that can contribute to the solution. But the **problem is complex as it is also linked to a fertile ground for disinformation in the region itself** as evidenced by various reports in the past few years as well as on the **increasing levels of polarization in society** and harsh political confrontations and low level of trust. So the question of compatibility between the Internet and liberal democracy is still open for research.
- With **lack of transparency on one side and heavy propaganda** on the other from governments themselves in the region, the issues of information manipulation and disinformation only gets even more complicated and thus requiring **strong editorial boards and newsroom to be resilient to such information disorders, strengthen ethical standards, empowering self-regulation and fact checking in the newsroom** as core task of doing news media as well as supporting **fact checkers and their networks across the region and particularly with the EU**. EU has published as we learned **Guidelines for Media and Digital Literacy** for policy makers and teachers, that are to be translated in all IWB6 languages and hopefully mainstreamed.
- But, as demonstrated by various speakers across the panels in the conference, the big elephant in the room is **SOCIAL MEDIA** and the big tech and their algorithms. In this sense, much hope is on the EU Digital Act and also the Media Freedom Act to create a buffer between tech giants and interests of democracy and good quality journalism and move from **self-regulation of big tech into regulation**. As part of the accession, these legal changes will eventually affect Western Balkans, but the EU must support them all the way particularly in terms of addressing the ever-changing big tech realities we face.
- **Constructive and solution-oriented journalism** provides new hopes in the horizon for good quality journalism by building alliances with communities, audiences, civil society, and other actors for reporting and proposing solutions to particular problems such as for

instance environment. **This does not mean competing with professional journalism, this means strengthening rigorous journalism and embrace with professionalism and integrity new models of doing journalism.** Modern content production by capitalising on the technological advancements is as crucial for producing good quality content and attractive formats for different groups of audiences.

- Also, **collaborative production** across the region is of interest and could help media in their sustainability efforts. More so, the collaboration between **mainstream media and factcheckers** as in the Norwegian model. The EU is supporting Montenegro for the media fund as we heard today in Montenegro and if that is successful, then it can be replicated in the region.
- All this leads us back to the core issues of **sustainability of media outlets, particularly independent ones, and their financial resilience.** The EU and in coordination with other donors such as the USAID, is providing support to the media sector. We heard of about 38 mln euro by the EU for the media sector in the WB and a positive news that this will increase in the future.
- Some of the key interventions were also discussed in the workshop on As was highlighted in the first panel: information manipulation and disinformation also fake news is not only a problem of the media and its content, it is a problem against society and democracy such as **EU for Sustainable Media** implemented by GIZ that provides direct support for media business development, among other support. EU is supported the media fund in Montenegro and if successful it will be scaled up in the region. The **European Endowment for Democracy** continues its direct and complementary support to media outlets and journalists. Also, the Balkan Media Assistance Forward by USAID was presented as well and hopefully Albania will join the programme on the way.
- The donor support can never be sufficient to overcome financial challenges of media outlets, but it is a core support that can boost their development further. It needs to be combined with other support including capacity development, mentoring, networking, collaborative production support, equipment and so on. Media outlets themselves need to explore alternative sources of revenues.
- We all are aware of the challenges and they are many. We all are aware that there is no quick fix to these issues. We can focus on some easy wins and low hanging fruits, but we also need to work together in the long term and by we I mean media and civil society, donors and governments alike, creative industries and businesses, academia and cultural institutions, we need to build stronger alliances and coalitions to counter information manipulation and protect our values and democracy and independent quality journalism is key. These are open challenges and I am sure we will continue this dialogue and also reflection about these issues.
- Congratulation to the winners of the EU prize for investigative journalism and kudos to their work and its impact. This practice of awards as a financial and moral incentive for should continue and expanded.