



Resolution 2179 (2017)¹

Political influence over independent media and journalists

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly considers the right to freedom of expression and information and the freedom and diversity of the media as fundamental elements of a true democracy; no system can claim to be democratic if it does not effectively ensure pluralism and independence of the media.

2. There is no independence when journalists and their families are exposed to physical threats or are subject to arbitrary detention, or when the media outlets which employ them run the risk of simply being put out of business. The Assembly is also deeply concerned about the many forms of psychological violence, intimidation and harassment, including through the internet and social media, and about the range of tactics used to erode media freedom, force journalists into self-censorship or take control of media outlets and subjugate them to vested interests.

3. National authorities must not only guarantee journalists' security and media freedom by preventing and unconditionally condemning blatant violations, but they must also recognise and oppose the threat that more insidious methods pose to the independence and genuine pluralism of the media, to the interest of the public in receiving unbiased, critical information and hence to our democratic systems.

4. The digital environment is prompting profound changes in the media business model, which endanger the financial viability of many media operators. This intensifies the risk of financial screws being tightened on the media to tame them. Public funding has greater importance than in the past, in particular – but not only – for public service media (PSM). However, media which are financially dependent on public funding become more vulnerable to political influence. Such influence can also derive from exploitation of the procedures for appointing senior PSM managers.

5. The Assembly denounces all practices which are aimed at fuelling public distrust of the media. Regrettably, some political forces are using this strategy to silence criticism and dissenting views voiced by independent media. However, mistrust could also derive from misusing the media – and in particular new media – as a weapon against political antagonists and from the increasing risk of manipulation of public opinion through the media.

6. As political (but also social and economic) actors have moved from traditional media to the internet and social media for their communication with the public, journalism's role in the way the public acquires, values and exchanges information is diminishing, and with it the possibility of independent media to initiate and uphold quality public debate. This makes them less attractive, less competitive and eventually less viable and thus more vulnerable to political influence.

7. The Assembly therefore calls for greater commitment to safeguard journalists' security and freedom and to uphold media pluralism and independence. It recommends that the Council of Europe member States:

7.1. implement effectively Recommendation CM/Rec(2016)4 on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors, by focusing on four areas: prevention; protection; the prosecution of all threats against journalists and media freedom; and the promotion of information, education and awareness raising;

1. *Assembly debate* on 29 June 2017 (26th Sitting) (see [Doc. 14339](#), report of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, rapporteur: Mr Stefan Schennach). *Text adopted by the Assembly* on 29 June 2017 (26th Sitting). See also [Recommendation 2111 \(2017\)](#).



- 7.2. ask for independent reviews of their laws and practices which have, or could have, a chilling effect on media freedom, such as those on national security, terrorism and defamation, and entrust human rights commissions or ombudspersons with monitoring the implementation of these laws and practices to avoid their being misused to stifle media freedom;
- 7.3. improve the legal provisions concerning transparency of formal and beneficial ownership, as well as of funding mechanisms and organisational and managerial structures of the media, including online media and considering their specific nature, to allow for identification of possible sources of control and influence and to strengthen accountability. In this respect, the Assembly recalls in particular its [Resolution 2065 \(2015\)](#) on increasing transparency of media ownership;
- 7.4. review PSM governance mechanisms, keeping in mind the basic standards set by the “Guiding principles for public service media governance” in the appendix to Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)1 on public service media governance, and aiming at the genuine independence of PSM, including in editorial terms, while preserving the oversight role of national authorities and, in particular, parliaments;
- 7.5. ensure transparency of the operation of regulatory bodies; the provisions for their appointment, mandate and powers must secure their independence from any influence, especially from governments;
- 7.6. ensure that appointment procedures for PSM managers and staff, for which an intervention by the public authorities is required:
 - 7.6.1. respect the role of the opposition and, when parliaments are involved, provide for appointment decisions to be taken by a qualified majority;
 - 7.6.2. are not used to exert influence over PSM programmes or editorial policy;
 - 7.6.3. fulfil clear, merit-based criteria, strictly related to the role and remit of PSM and are neutral with regard to political views;
 - 7.6.4. are made for a specified term, which can only be shortened in a limited number of legally defined circumstances;
 - 7.6.5. are respectful of gender balance;
- 7.7. review their (national, regional and local) funding systems for PSM and private media outlets in order to:
 - 7.7.1. avoid mechanisms being used (directly or indirectly) to exercise editorial influence or to threaten the beneficiaries’ institutional autonomy;
 - 7.7.2. ensure that financing schemes are based on fair and objective criteria and are operated in a non-discriminatory manner;
 - 7.7.3. guarantee full transparency of the funding systems’ operation, and in particular of the level of public funding, grants and sponsorship, and provide the public with easy access to this information;
- 7.8. design PSM funding systems so that they:
 - 7.8.1. guarantee a level of funding coherent with the agreed role and remit of PSM, thus enabling them to properly fulfil their mission in a fast-changing media environment;
 - 7.8.2. provide for an independent body to determine – and regularly review – the level of funding, following consultation with the PSM concerned, with tight limits on the room for manoeuvre of policy makers (parliaments and governments) to amend any proposals from this independent body;
 - 7.8.3. ensure predictable and sufficiently stable revenues, but also the buoyancy of the funding schemes; in this respect, national authorities should consider the possibility of combining different sources of funding (including advertising), while giving preference to licence fees (paid by all households irrespective of the device) and/or earmarked taxes, the level of which should be indexed to guarantee financial stability in real terms;
 - 7.8.4. provide for a mechanism to recover excess income from beneficiaries and reinvest it in the system;

- 7.9. design public support schemes for private media and non-profit media so that these schemes:
- 7.9.1. reinforce pluralism, also paying attention to non-commercial media outlets, such as free radio stations, as well as to media which are the expression of local perspectives of societal challenges, or of cultural diversity;
 - 7.9.2. favour investments which are necessary for the media to keep pace with technical developments.

8. The Assembly urges all political forces and political leaders to firmly condemn psychological violence, harassment and cyberbullying against journalists and to join efforts to counter the growing distrust of journalism and journalists. Political actors certainly have the right to respond to critical views and dissent expressed by the media, but such reactions must respect freedom of expression, and any behaviour inciting their followers to target journalists and media outlets is to be proscribed.

9. The Assembly calls on media associations to be more active in identifying and denouncing abuses by unprofessional individuals who misuse the title of “journalist” or unscrupulous media outlets which seek to manipulate public opinion by disseminating false information. Political lynchings staged by deceitful media operators must be opposed.