

European Commission: Report of the High Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism in the European Union

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On 21 January 2013, the High Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism published its report entitled “A free and pluralistic media to sustain European democracy”. Established by Neelie Kroes in October 2011, the group’s remit was to draw up recommendations for the respect, protection, support and promotion of media freedom and pluralism. The group was chaired by Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga and included three other experts, Herta Däubler-Gmelin, Luís Miguel Poiares Pessoa Maduro and Ben Hammersley.

The report contains 30 recommendations and is divided into five sections: why media freedom and pluralism matter; the role of the European Union in maintaining media freedom and pluralism; the changing media landscape; protection of journalistic freedom; and media pluralism.

Media freedom and pluralism are crucial for European democracy. However, there are numerous obstacles that have the potential to restrict journalistic freedom or reduce pluralism (political influence, commercial pressures, the changing media landscape or the rise of new media). The conduct of some journalists, which has recently come to light, may also undermine the sector’s credibility and long-term viability.

The group considers that the main responsibility for maintaining media freedom and pluralism lies with the member states. However, the European Union also has an important role to play. In particular, it must uphold the fundamental rights of EU citizens and protect democracy when it is threatened by restrictions imposed by one or more member states. The group recommends that the European Union should be considered competent to act to protect media freedom and pluralism at State level (recommendation 1), and that there should be further harmonisation, especially of cross-border activities (recommendation 5). The group considers that European and national competition authorities should take into account the specific value of media pluralism in the enforcement of competition rules (recommendation 8). The European Union should protect media freedom and pluralism in Europe and beyond (conditions for accession to the European Union, and journalistic freedom in international commercial fora - recommendations 9 and 10).

The changing media landscape must be taken into account: whether due to the impact of new technologies (recommendations 12 and 13); new business models (recommendations 14-16); the changing nature of journalism (recommendations 17 and 18) or of the way people relate to the media (media literacy and funding for research - recommendations 19 and 20).

The protection of journalistic freedom is at the heart of media freedom and pluralism. One of the fundamental rights of journalists is to be able to protect their sources. The group therefore recommends that all EU members should have enshrined in their respective legislation the principle of protection of journalistic sources (recommendation 21). Journalists should also have free, non-discriminatory access to public or official events (recommendation 22). However, journalists also have responsibilities, particularly vis-à-vis persons whose reputation has been tarnished (recommendation 24). The group recommends respect for and the publication of codes of conduct and editorial lines (recommendation 25).

Finally, in order to ensure media pluralism, the group considers the role that should be played by public media, particularly public service broadcasters (recommendations 26 and 27). It invites European political actors to promote media coverage of European affairs (recommendation 30).

The report was written after consultation with academics, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, representatives of various associations and media professionals.

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http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/media_taskforce/doc/pluralism/hlg/hlg_final_report.pdf

