

Addressing Public Concern over Media Freedom



**A report of the Committee for Editorial Independence
of the Czech media house Economia**

Prague, September 2023

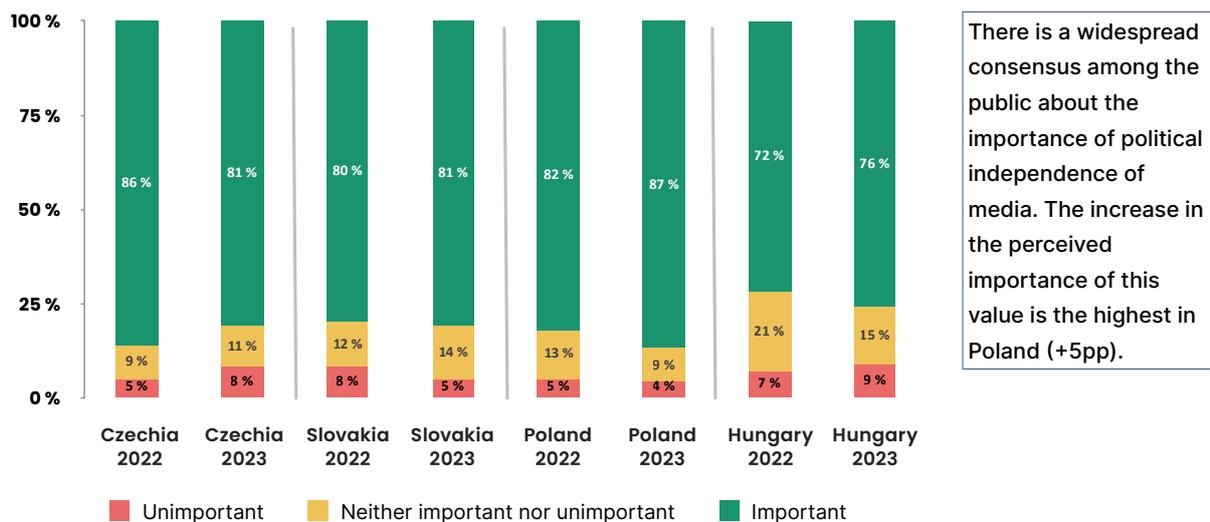
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Executive Summary

This report, informed by the most comprehensive public opinion poll on media freedom conducted in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, presents essential recommendations for journalists and publishers in the Visegrád region.

The Media Freedom Poll 2023 sounds the alarm on a rising tide of public anxiety over media freedom, with a crisis of trust at the heart of every newsroom. A reflection of this mounting unease is the growing consensus among V4 citizens regarding the importance of politically independent media. Since our 2022 survey, there has been a marked increase in this sentiment: in Poland, it grew from 82% to 87%, and in Hungary, it rose from 72% to 76%. Guided by these insights, our recommendations aim to navigate these complex challenges, offering strategies for news organisations to regain public trust.

Importance of political independence of media: comparison with 2022 data



There is a widespread consensus among the public about the importance of political independence of media. The increase in the perceived importance of this value is the highest in Poland (+5pp).

Q: How important it is for a society to have news media that can operate without any interferences or censorship by the state or government?

The recommendations are aimed at stimulating a recovery in public trust by proactively enhancing journalistic integrity, championing media independence, and strengthening public faith in quality media across Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary.

The report will be circulated among media, journalists, publishing houses and government agencies across the V4, reigniting a public debate on the necessity for professional media to actively champion enhanced media standards in the region.

“Today, we are unveiling a series of recommendations to kickstart a much-needed dialogue on how quality journalism can renew public trust and lay down the benchmark for unbiased and unwavering reporting, free from fear or favour. With trust in media plummeting; it is up to us, the journalists, to rise to the challenge of safeguarding the integrity of our profession. Our call to action extends to publishers and governments alike. If we fail to rally together, to counter this threat, we risk the collapse of quality journalism in a matter of years.”

Tessa Szyszkowitz, Chair of the Committee for Editorial Independence

“These results show that the overwhelming majority of people in V4 want the media to be independent from political or business pressures, yet they also understand that today this is not the case. I am happy to see the results show trust in the EU and expectation from the EU to act. This is exactly what I have been doing with new initiatives to protect journalists and the media over the past years.”

Věra Jourová, Vice President for Values and Transparency, European Commission

Summary of Recommendations

1. Strengthen EU solidarity for Visegrád media

The escalating threats facing media independence across the EU, particularly within the Visegrád Group, demand swift and robust support for the European Media Freedom Act. This Act stands as a vital first step in preserving the bedrock principles of our democratic institutions.

2. Advocate for transparent ownership models

Given the critical importance of media independence highlighted in our survey, it is imperative that transparency requirements within the European Media Freedom Act are adopted and enhanced. Transparent ownership models can restore public trust and provide clarity on influence.

3. Endorse robust governance for editorial independence

Addressing the mounting concerns over editorial freedom, especially in the V4, requires the backing of strong governance structures like Editorial Independence Committees. By doing so, we reinforce the commitment to free and objective journalism.

4. Boost national journalist associations with self-regulation

Our data suggests a significant trust in professional journalistic bodies to uphold media freedom in the V4. To harness this, we recommend vigorously promoting genuinely representative and independent national journalistic associations empowered with self-regulating mandates.

5. Enhance the role of the Board for Media Services

Recognising the escalating concerns over media freedom in the Visegrád region and the need for broader cooperation on journalistic values and standards, we propose the European Commission's proposed European Board for Media Services goes beyond mere regulation. It should be empowered to coordinate, advocate for, and set EU-wide media ethics and standards. Such a move will not only set a benchmark for media standards but also protect and champion media freedom in the face of increasing threats, both political and private.

6. Raise awareness of organisations championing journalistic cooperation

With entities like Reporters Without Borders, the IPI and the European Federation of Journalists playing a pivotal role in fostering international cooperation among journalists, it is essential to prioritise and bolster awareness of organisations championing quality media.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen EU solidarity with Visegrád media

The Media Freedom Poll 2023 exposes profound public disquiet over editorial independence within the Visegrád Group, with the alarm bells ringing loudest in Slovakia and Poland. In nations like Poland and Hungary, governmental machinations are recognised as posing the most significant risk to media freedom. Bartosz Wieliński, Deputy Editor of Gazeta Wyborcza, recounts, “Every day as a Polish journalist, I grapple with escalating pressures. Our exposés are routinely met with a barrage of lawsuits, nearing 150 since the Law and Justice party's 2015 rise to power. The state has systematically curbed revenue streams from independent media, pulling advertising and subscriptions in a clear bid to silence independent media.”

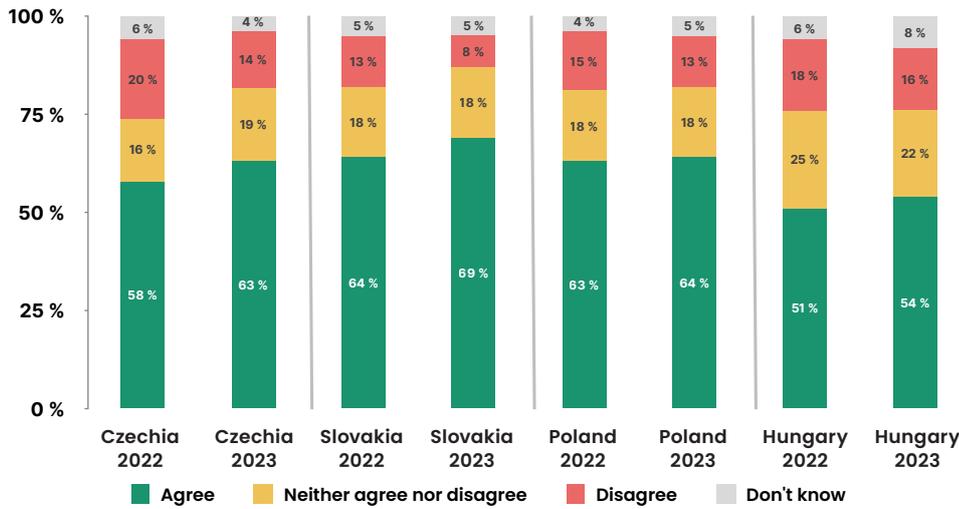
In contrast, media moguls and business tycoons seem to loom large as threats in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The International Press Institute's data, pinpointing Fidesz's stranglehold on nearly 80% of Hungary's media market, is a glaring anomaly in the EU's media freedom blueprint.

This unsettling landscape underlines the urgent need for EU solidarity in championing media freedoms. Despite hesitations over the European Media Freedom Act from public and private actors in Germany, establishing a unified European framework for protecting media freedoms remains crucial.

Respected publishers are acutely aware that fair, transparent journalism is the backbone of democracies and bolsters the European Union. In contrast, the dangers of propaganda and skewed narratives are manifestly destabilising. The 2023 revelation about Mathias Döpfner's sway over Germany's BILD newspaper before the Federal Election is testament to the fact that even established democracies are not immune to challenges to media freedom.

Given this context, an unwavering EU commitment, especially towards the Visegrád media, becomes paramount. The European Media Freedom Act stands out as an important first step in this journey. For the media to remain pillars of democracy, assertive action from journalists, publishers and politicians must be an imperative.

The role of the EU in protecting media freedom



Just like last year, majority of people are in favour of the EU imposing sanctions on countries for interfering with media freedom, most in the Czech Republic and Slovakia (+5pp compared to last year).

Q: The EU should impose penalties or sanctions on countries whose governments interfere with media freedom.

2. Advocate for transparent ownership models

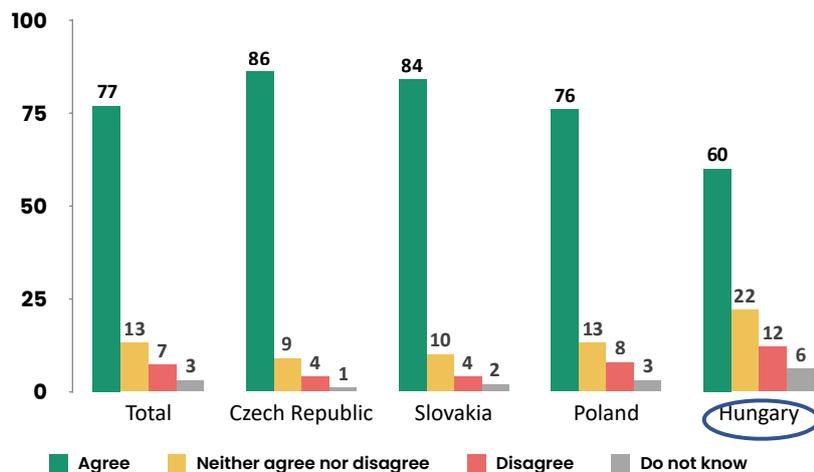
Our survey results highlighted public apprehension over who owns and influences the news media. A significant 87% of participants from Poland underscored the importance of media independence from owners or commercial interests. In Slovakia 84% agreed that it is important for the public to know who owns the media. Furthermore, there is widespread support across V4 countries for conflict-of-interest disclosure.

75% of V4 respondents believe that the media should always declare potential conflicts of interest.

At present, the European Media Freedom Act only demands the public disclosure of the names of direct or indirect owners who can wield influence. To regain public trust in high-quality media, it is essential to enhance these transparency requirements significantly.

We believe that this information should be not only transparent but verifiable. Only when clear, verifiable, and publicly available information is accessible can the public make well-informed decisions about the reliability of their news sources.

Media ownership transparency



Most people agree that it is important for the public to know who owns the media. Hungary displays relatively lower agreement than the rest of the V4 countries.

Q: Thinking about news media in „country“, please tell us how much you agree or disagree with following statements: It is important that the public knows who owns the media.

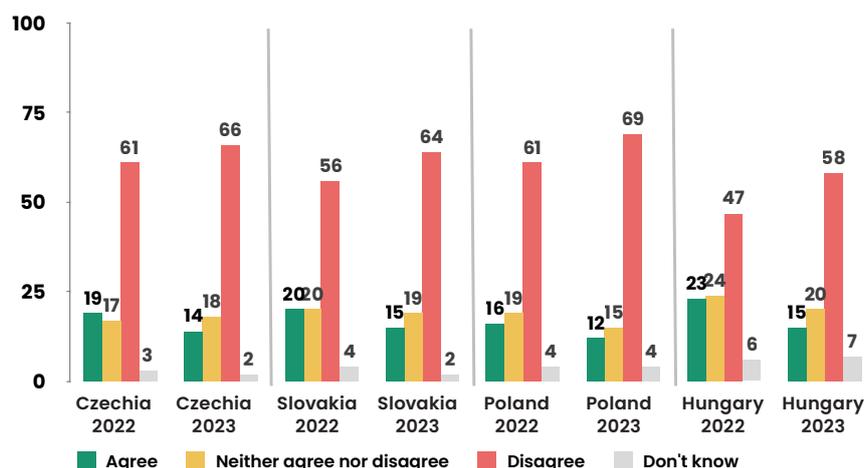
3. Endorse robust governance for editorial independence

With concern over editorial independence growing across the V4, it is clear steps must be taken to reassure the public that vested interests are not dictating editorial content.

Our poll clearly shows people are aware of the need to protect newsrooms from proprietor influence and strongly disagree with owners telling journalists what to write.

Opinions on the role of media owners:

“media owners have a right to tell their journalists what to write or say”



In all countries, the % of people who disagree has grown, most significantly in Hungary (+11pp).

Q: Please tell us to what extent you agree or disagree with following statements: Media owners have a right to tell their journalists what to write or say.

This is a key requirement in the European Commission's European Media Freedom Act (Article 6) and a provision we believe can help clarify which publications are genuinely committed to upholding principles of objective journalism.

Article 6: Duties of media service providers providing news and current affairs content.

Without prejudice to national constitutional laws consistent with the Charter, media service providers providing news and current affairs content shall take measures that they deem appropriate with a view to guaranteeing the independence of individual editorial decisions. Such measures shall aim to: (a) guarantee that editors are free to take individual editorial decisions in the exercise of their professional activity; and (b) ensure disclosure of any actual or potential conflict of interest by any party having a stake in media service providers that may affect the provision of news and current affairs content.

Where these safeguards have been adopted it has not interfered with the internal functioning and operations of the publishing houses. It has also had no impact on the commercial effectiveness of the media houses and is seen as providing a commercial advantage over media less clearly committed to media freedom. Indeed, the Wall Street Journal, the Guardian's Scott Trust and the BBC have all adopted self-regulating models of oversight within their governance structures.

The Economia media house in the Czech Republic has already successfully established a committee for editorial independence within its governance structure to provide reassurance for journalists and consumers over editorial independence. The experience in the past four years, since the Committee for Editorial Independence was implemented, has been very positive for both journalists and publishers: "Readers' trust is actually the most valuable asset a medium outlet has", says Lenka Černá, CEO of Economia. "Establishing the Committee for Editorial Independence, anchored firmly in our corporate governance structure, has enhanced the credibility of Economia's editorial content, giving us a competitive edge. We now attract the highest number of readers from specific target groups, with recent research showing that 87% of potential readers consider unbiased media essential."

Given the concerns highlighted in the polling, it is crucial that news organisations consider the establishment of EICs not only as a tool for structural reinforcement within their organisations but also as a standard-setting commitment to the principles of objective journalism.

4. Boost national journalist associations with self-regulation

Our poll results show a relatively high degree of public trust in professional journalist associations across the Visegrád countries when it comes to protecting media freedom. Yet, it is essential to acknowledge that many journalists believe current national associations do not fully represent the industry's breadth and diversity. They have voiced concerns about these associations' relevance and independence. In some countries, there is a notable lack of interest in any form of association, while in others, the journalistic community finds itself split into two opposing factions.

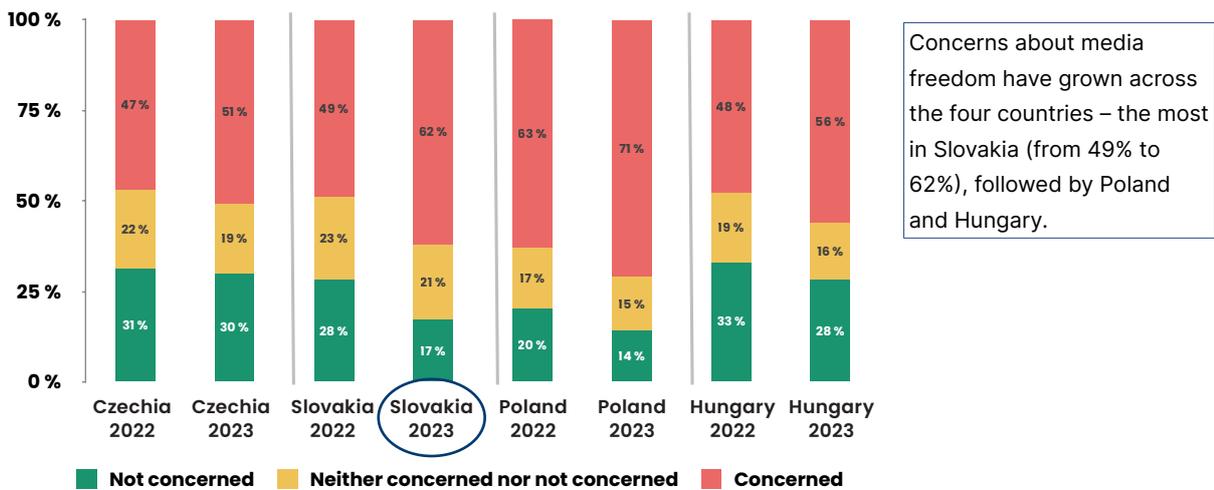
Considering this landscape, we advocate for the transformation of journalist associations into properly representative and independent national journalistic associations with self-regulating mandates in each of the V4 countries. The objective is not to impose compulsory membership, but to provide

a platform where journalists can rally behind a unified ethical code. This code would not only safeguard journalistic independence but also uphold the highest standards of the profession. These national bodies should actively seek alignment with the broader European journalistic community, exemplified by their potential membership of Europe-wide associations like Press Councils.eu (<https://www.presscouncils.eu>).

This movement towards representative associations, bolstered by a commitment to universally accepted journalistic standards, can serve to enhance trust in journalism amongst Europe's citizens. Publishers have a role to play in this ecosystem. By subscribing to ethical guidelines that emphasise principles such as respect for human dignity, accuracy, truthfulness, and the management of conflicts of interest, they can set the tone for industry-wide adherence.

In fostering this synergy – nationally unified journalistic practices nested within a broader European context – we can address the public's concerns and significantly enhance media freedom and integrity in the Visegrád region.

Concerns about media freedom growing (comparison with 2022 data)



Concerns about media freedom have grown across the four countries – the most in Slovakia (from 49% to 62%), followed by Poland and Hungary.

Q: Can you tell us how concerned are you right now about the current state of media freedom in your country?

5. Enhance the role of the Board for Media Services

The Media Freedom Poll 2023 highlighted rising concerns over media freedom in the Visegrád region, alongside strong consensus on core journalistic values like impartiality and accuracy.

Political and oligarchic interference in V4 member states has made a mockery of self-regulation at a national level. To tackle this, we support the European Media Freedom Act's establishment of a European Board for Media Services to act as a watchdog to ensure consistent protection of media freedoms across member states.

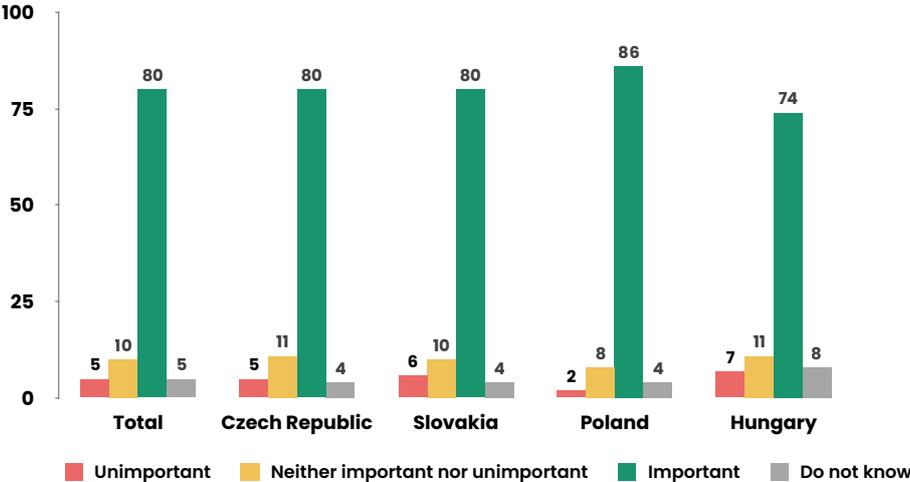
But our vision for the Board goes beyond it being solely a regulatory body. We see it playing a proactive role, one that involves coordinating and advocating for EU-wide journalistic ethics and media standards. Such a Board would not only advocate for the adoption of the best journalistic practices throughout the EU, but also promote models of media transparency and accountability. Furthermore, it would foster solidarity and collaboration among news media across member states, particularly in the face of governmental and private interferences.

In the Visegrád countries, where our poll highlighted acute concerns about media freedom, uniting in support of this Board is crucial. This collective stance would signify not just a commitment to media freedom within their respective national boundaries, but also a commitment to championing the cause beyond their borders. At the same time, we emphatically back the calls to insulate the Board from political pressures and potential manipulation by national governments.

By establishing an enhanced Board for Media Services, we can forge a stronger, collaborative media landscape across the EU, reinforcing the principles of press freedom, integrity, and transparency, which the public clearly seeks.

Importance of journalistic values :

media produce news content that is truthful and factually accurate



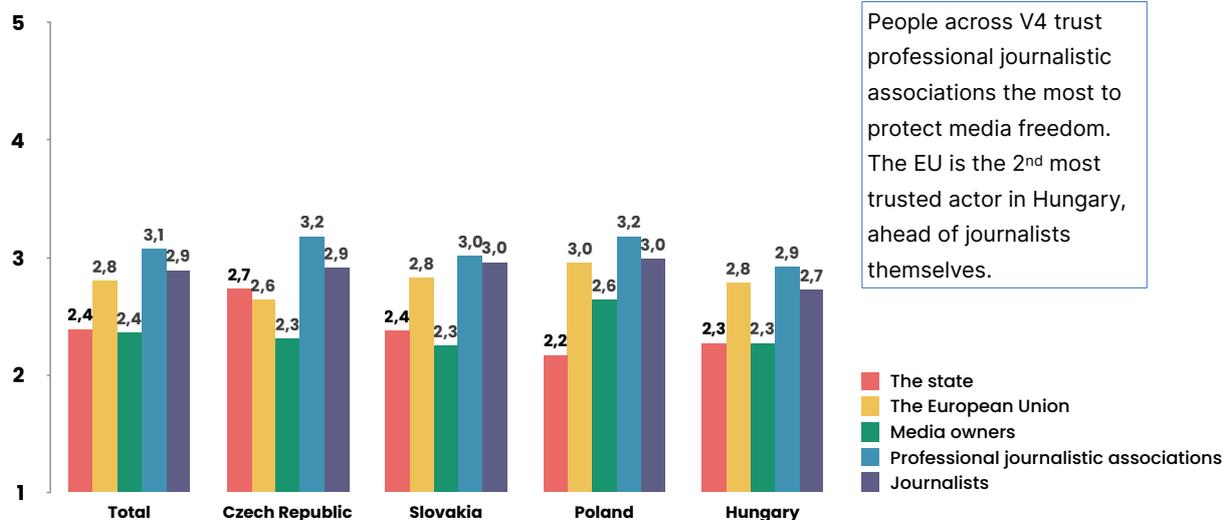
Q: Thinking about news media outlets that you consume regularly, please tell us how important it is for you that...

6. Raise awareness of organisations championing journalistic cooperation

The Media Freedom Poll 2023 underscores a notable trust in journalistic associations to safeguard media freedom, with the public displaying greater confidence in these associations than in individual journalists. In regions where national journalist associations are still nascent, collaboration with international counterparts becomes pivotal to spotlight challenges to media freedom and journalistic autonomy.

Trust in protecting media freedom

(average scores)



People across V4 trust professional journalistic associations the most to protect media freedom. The EU is the 2nd most trusted actor in Hungary, ahead of journalists themselves.

Q: How much would you trust following actors or institutions to protect media freedom in „COUNTRY“?

Key players like Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the IPI, and the European Federation of Journalists are at the forefront of nurturing global journalist collaboration. Their prominence becomes even more essential given the backdrop of “alternative news” driven by malicious actors, such as troll factories in Russia, and the proliferation of AI-generated disinformation.

RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index, titled “**journalism threatened by fake content industry**”, vividly portrays the profound impact of the digital fake content ecosystem on press freedom. The report warns of potential long-term erosion of European democracy and underscores the imperative for EU-wide measures to uphold media freedom, a cornerstone of democratic values.

It is a key reason why RSF **has joined advocates** for the European Media Freedom Act, emphasising its potential to provide robust safeguards for editorial independence, strength in combating intentional media manipulation, and ensuring non-discriminatory media funding.

As Erhard Stackl, vice president of the Austrian chapter of RSF, insists, “Organisations like RSF champion not just the rights of journalists but serve the broader public interest, amplifying fair, comprehensive, and fact-based reporting during times of heightened media repression globally.”

Conclusions

The Media Freedom Poll 2023, while raising significant concerns, also provides hope and a path forward. As Bartosz Wieliński of Gazeta Wyborcza observes, “Citizens across Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary are acutely aware of the challenges faced by free journalism. In Poland, free media remains the sole window into issues of corruption, nepotism, and misuse of public funds, among other concerns.”

Our poll shows the overwhelming sentiment across the V4 is a clear appeal for EU intervention, especially when member states overlook the safeguarding of essential media.

In this context, Misha Glenny, Rector of the Institute for Human Sciences, says, “The Poll illuminates an escalating crisis. Journalists, publishers, and champions of European democracy must bolster editorial independence, especially in areas compromised by vested interests, ensuring the delivery of reliable and unbiased reporting.”

Endorsing the European Media Freedom Act emerges as a pivotal first step, laying down a consistent framework to protect journalists and cement media freedom. There is still a lot of debate about the EMFA, and reservations from several publishing groups remain considerably strong. It is crucial to acknowledge these reservations, but it is also important to recognise that the public is increasingly concerned about journalism. This necessitates decisive action, even if it means the EU acting despite these concerns. The deteriorating trust in V4 media underscores the need for a swift and robust response to ensure the preservation of media freedom and integrity.

Schibsted is amongst those publishers who have highlighted the importance of the Act in ensuring free and independent media not just in the V4 but right across the EU at a time when it has come under such intense pressure.

“Citizens' access to information from media that operates freely and independently, in line with basic editorial principles, is a prerequisite for liberal democracies. Accurate and balanced information about what is happening in our societies, without interference from authorities or private special interests, gives citizens the opportunity to make informed choices and participate in the public debate. Unfortunately, media freedom is threatened in several countries in Europe, which is not just a problem for each individual country, but for Europe as a whole. We believe that only the EU has sufficient power to curb this development. That is why we support the European Media Freedom Act and hope for its swift adoption.” Petra Wikström, Director of Public Policy, Schibsted.

By embracing the recommendations of this report, the Visegrád media landscape can evolve into a more fortified, independent, and credible domain, echoing the democratic ethos. The experience of *Economia* in the Czech Republic serves as a compelling example. *Economia* has implemented key requirements of the Act without any negative impact on its commercial functioning; in fact, the opposite has been true. It demonstrates that establishing robust governance structures for editorial independence not only supports media freedom and integrity but can also have a positive impact on the commercial viability of publishers at a time of growing public concern.

“Now the ball is clearly in the camp of the European Parliament and the Member States: they should adopt the Media Freedom Act and our proposal against abusive litigation – SLAPPs – as soon as possible”.

Věra Jourová, Vice President for Values and Transparency, European Commission

Tessa Szyszkowitz, Chairwoman of the Committee for Editorial Independence, emphasises the importance of collective action: “Our strength lies in our united stand for media and journalistic independence, a cornerstone of democracy and the rule of law. It is incumbent upon all of us – all those who believe in a free press – to act before it is too late.”

Addressing the challenges highlighted in this report is of critical importance for the future of democracy and the rule of law in the Visegrád region and Europe as a whole. It will undoubtedly involve overcoming obstacles and addressing the concerns of various stakeholders. However, by rallying behind a unified ethical code, enhancing transparency, and establishing robust governance structures, societies can significantly enhance media freedom and integrity in the Visegrád region and beyond. The urgency of the situation demands that governments, the EU, publishers, and the public take immediate and decisive action to protect and fortify media freedom across Europe.

About the Media Freedom Poll 2023

Media Freedom Poll is the most extensive public opinion survey on media freedom ever conducted across Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary. In the second year of the survey, over 4 thousand people were polled in the V4 countries during March 2023. The survey was initiated by the Committee for Editorial Independence and supported by **Reporters Without Borders** and the **Bakala Foundation**. More at <https://mediafreedompoll.com/en/>.

About the Committee for Editorial Independence

The Committee for Editorial Independence is an industry-driven initiative designed to ensure journalists and editors can carry out their work free from any interference, without fear or favour from both internal and external pressures. It seeks to promote free media and positively influence journalistic culture, not only in Central and Eastern Europe. More at <https://free.economia.cz>.



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