

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Recommendation 498 (2023)¹

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

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

a. its 2021-2026 priority 6b. “Democratic societies: quality of representative democracy and citizen participation” outlined in the *2021-2026 Priorities of the Congress*, 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 to its Resolution 496 (2023) “Local and regional media: watchdogs of democracy and guardians of community cohesion” (CG(2023)45-11fin);

d. the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular Goal 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions and its Target 16.10 to 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 to member States 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 (ETS No. 5, the Convention)”;

f. 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 and its guidelines, in particular paragraph 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; paragraph 1.3.2 on the promotion of media pluralism and diversity; paragraph 2.4.3 on local and hyperlocal media; paragraph 2.5.1 on the complementary nature of different media types; and paragraph 2.5.5 on political non-interference of local authorities in media;

g. the Committee of Ministers’ declaration of 13 February 2019 on the financial sustainability of quality journalism in the digital age, which outlined 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’s Campaign for the Safety of Journalists, launched in October 2023 under Latvia’s Presidency of the Committee of Ministers.

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;

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, affecting their position in the digital environment and the quality of media content.

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 States;

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 considerations for 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’s Campaign for the Safety of Journalists and include local and regional news 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;

1. Debated and adopted by the Congress during the 45th Session on 25 October 2023 (see document [CG\(2023\)45-11](#), explanatory memorandum), co-rapporteurs Cecilia DALMAN EEK, Sweden (R, SOC/G/PD), and Mélanie LEPOULTIER, France (L, ILDG).

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 its explanatory memorandum (Document CG(2023)45-11) in their activities on this issue relating to Council of Europe member States.