

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Resolution 374 (2014)¹ **The role of regional media as a tool for building participatory democracy**

1. Pluralist democracy necessarily requires a plurality of sources, voices and features in the media. Independent and diverse media are a prerequisite for freedom of expression to flourish, while the freedom of expression and media freedom are in turn closely linked to the question of citizen participation. The right to freedom of expression and the right to participate in public affairs together constitute a crucial element of pluralist democracy.

2. Media play vital roles in pluralist democratic societies, such as acting as public or social watchdogs, circulating information and ideas and providing forums for public debate. Over the past years, the media sector has undergone tremendous technology-driven changes, with the digitalisation of media services, the emergence of new media and “citizen journalism” and the development of community media. This transformation has led to unprecedented levels of interaction and engagement by users, offering new opportunities for democratic citizenship and for users’ participation in the process of creating and disseminating information and content, thus blurring the boundaries between public and private communication. The evolving relationship between traditional and new media prompts a need to re-examine existing media policy at all levels of governance, in order to offer a policy framework which guarantees an appropriate level of protection to all media actors and provides a clear indication of their duties and responsibilities.

3. The democratic role of the media assumes particular importance at the regional level due to the close relationship between regional media and populations from the areas and communities they serve, enhancing the participatory potential of citizens. This relationship tends to be closer, stronger and more representative than at the national level. The proximity of regional media with their target communities is also political in character, as regional journalism fosters engagement with regional politics and issues that are either under-represented or absent in the national media. The importance of media pluralism and diversity of media content is especially evident at the regional level due to politico-economic considerations particular to regional media.

4. The Council of Europe has adopted a range of instruments relevant to the operation of media across its 47 member States, which are also relevant to regional media. In this regard, the Congress notes in particular the Committee of Ministers’ Recommendation No. R (99)14 on universal community service concerning new communication and information services; its Recommendation Rec(2003)9 on

measures to promote the democratic and social contribution of digital broadcasting; its 2007 Declaration on protecting the role of the media in democracy in the context of media concentration; its Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)2 on media pluralism and diversity of media content; its Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)11 on promoting freedom of expression and information in the new information and communications environment; its 2008 Declaration on the role of community media in promoting social cohesion and intercultural dialogue; its Recommendation CM/Rec(2011)7 on a new notion of media; and its 2012 Declaration and Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)1 on public service media governance.

5. The Congress also notes the conclusions of the 1st Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Media and Information Society (Belgrade, 7-8 November 2013), including the Political Declaration on freedom of expression and democracy in the digital age: opportunities, rights, responsibilities, and resolutions on Internet freedom, on preserving the essential role of media in the digital age and on the safety of journalists. Furthermore, the Congress recalls the continued relevance of its Resolution 145 (2002) on the state of regional print media in Europe – Pluralism, independence and freedom in regional press, its Resolution 203 (2005) on regional media and transfrontier co-operation, and its Resolution 282 (2009) on the digital divide and e-inclusion in the regions.

6. At the same time, the Congress notes with concern that the general situation of media freedom and safety of journalists in Europe is becoming increasingly worrisome. In their Resolution on the safety of journalists, the Ministers responsible for media and information society expressed their deep concern about continuing physical violence, including murder and inhuman treatment, harassment, judicial intimidation, threats, as well as arbitrary measures such as detentions, expulsions, surveillances, searches and seizures. Media pluralism and content diversity, including at the regional level, also continue to be threatened by growing monopolisation of the media market and insufficiency of financial means, as well as excessive concentration of ownership and centralised control over media, leading to a loss of editorial independence and disguised censorship.

7. The Congress is convinced that a robust and forward-looking new system of media governance is essential for the successful transition of public service media to a new media environment and for the development of new media, including at regional level. In the light of the above, the Congress invites regional authorities of the Council of Europe member States to:

a. recognise the role of regional media in promoting participatory democracy, and revise the existing regional regulatory frameworks to adapt them to the new media environment, taking into account the relevant provisions of the Committee of Ministers’ recommendations referred to in paragraph 4 above, as well as Resolutions 145 (2002) and 203 (2005) of the Congress;

b. ensure continued support for regional public service media, enjoying independent editorial control and

organisational autonomy and providing distinctive content on all services and platforms;

c. support and facilitate the development of non-profit media, especially community media, in particular by avoiding licensing regimes for new media, ensuring sufficient frequency allocation and exploring various funding possibilities – for example, using a “volunteer model” whereby only a limited number of professional staff train and help volunteers largely responsible for content creation;

d. establish mechanisms to ensure the safety and protection of journalists and journalism at local and regional level, and to prevent or promptly investigate alleged violations of media freedom;

e. revise, as appropriate, media ownership rules to seek greater transparency in order to protect and promote structural pluralism of audiovisual and print media;

f. put in place effective safeguards to prevent the risks of political influence and a lack of transparency in regional media, for example by declaring executive positions within regional media incompatible with holding a political mandate, and integrating political oversight of media financing within a system of checks and balances that guarantees editorial independence;

g. take measures to bridge the “digital divide” and promote media literacy, using as a reference Resolution 282 (2009) of the Congress on the digital divide and e-inclusion in the regions, as well as best practices of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) for encouraging online engagement and facilitating interaction and creativity to promote media literacy.

8. The Congress instructs its Current Affairs Committee to continue to address questions related to improving the functioning of regional media, and to ensure that the relevant good practices are disseminated to regional authorities, including through their national and European associations.

9. The Congress also invites its Governance Committee to include in its work programme, as aspects of good regional governance, the question of the good functioning of regional media, and to undertake a review of the existing legal framework and practices, with a view to drafting a resolution and recommendation on the state and prospects of regional media in a reconfigured, new media environment.

1. Debated and approved by the Chamber of Regions on 14 October 2014 and adopted by the Congress on 15 October 2014, 2nd Sitting (see Document CPR (27)3FINAL, explanatory memorandum), rapporteur: Johan van den Hout, Netherlands (R, SOC).