

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Recommendation 364 (2014)¹ **The role of regional media as a tool for building participatory democracy**

1. The media play a vital role in pluralist democratic societies, such as acting as public or social watchdogs, circulating information and ideas, and providing forums for public debate. These democratic roles assume particular importance at the regional level due to the proximity of the relationship between regional media and populations from the areas and communities they serve, which tends to be closer, stronger and more representative than at the national level. The proximity of regional media to their target communities is also political in character as regional journalism fosters engagement with regional politics and issues that are either underrepresented in, or absent from, 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.

2. 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 the 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 Council of Europe has adopted a range of instruments relevant to the operation of media across its 47 member States. The Congress notes in this regard the most recent 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 safety of journalists. However, references to regional media are dispersed across relevant provisions of these texts, and a considerable dot-joining exercise is required in order to draw a coherent picture.

4. 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 worrying. In their Resolution No. 3 on Safety of Journalists, the ministers responsible for media and information society expressed their deep concern about continuing physical violence used against journalists, including murder, inhuman treatment, harassment, judicial intimidation, threats, as well as arbitrary measures such as detention, expulsion, surveillance, search 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.

5. The Congress notes in this regard the current work of the Council of Europe aimed at protecting media freedom and ensuring the safety of journalists, including the Committee of Ministers’ decision to develop a Council of Europe Internet-based platform on violations of media freedom, the holding of a round table on “Safety of Journalists: from Commitment to Action” in Strasbourg on 19 May 2014, and the planned conference on “Media freedom and the safety of journalists”, to be organised by the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly in December 2014.

6. Referring to its Resolution 374 (2014) on “The role of regional media as a tool for building participatory democracy”, the Congress is convinced that improving the operation of regional media is an important factor for promoting media freedom and requires adaptation of legal frameworks to the new media environment, taking into account recommendations and policy guidelines elaborated by the Council of Europe.

7. In the light of the foregoing, the Congress asks the Committee of Ministers to undertake a review of the existing instruments, with a particular attention to the State and prospects of regional media in a reconfigured media environment, and to elaborate a new recommendation to Council of Europe member States addressing the key aspects of the regional media situation.

8. The Congress further asks the Committee of Ministers to invite the member States of the Council of Europe to:

a. recognise the role of regional media in promoting participatory democracy in European regions, and revise the existing regulatory frameworks to adapt to the specific situation of regional media in a new media environment, taking into account the relevant provisions of the Committee of Ministers’ recommendations in the media field, the conclusions of the 1st Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Media and Information Society, as well as Recommendations 119 (2002), 173 (2005) and 263 (2009) of the Congress;

b. include the safety of journalists and journalism as part of a wider notion of media freedom, so that it is not only related to physical threats and attacks but also to legislation and practice contradicting Council of Europe standards on freedom of expression, and establish mechanisms to ensure the safety and protection of journalists and journalism and to

prevent violations of media freedom or promptly investigate allegations of such violations;

c. allow regional media to benefit from existing media subsidies and use specific subsidy schemes for the promotion of regional journalism;

d. support efforts to maintain regional public service media, and to develop non-profit media, in particular community media;

e. take financial and regulatory measures to protect and promote structural pluralism of audiovisual and print media, seeking greater transparency in media ownership rules;

f. support measures to bridge the “digital divide” and promote media literacy at the regional level, taking into account Recommendation 263 (2009) of the Congress on “The digital divide and e-inclusion in the regions”.

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).