

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission

Charles Michel, President of the European Council

David Maria Sassoli, President of the European Parliament

Josep Borrell Fontelles, Vice-President of the European Commission, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

Věra Jourová, Vice-President of the European Commission, European Commissioner for Values and Transparency

Olivér Várhelyi, European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement

Eamon Gilmore, EU Special Representative for Human Rights

Marija Pejčinović Burić, Secretary General of the Council of Europe

Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO

Thomas Greminger, Secretary General of OSCE

Harlem Désir, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

7 May 2020

We, the undersigned 33 representatives of media development organisations based in the EU Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine), are writing to express our profound concerns about dangers of insufficient governmental and international support to the independent media and journalists in the region, which happens against the backdrop of COVID-19 pandemic and actions by national governments to curtail media freedoms.

On May 3, every year people across the planet celebrated World Press Freedom Day. It is a reminder to governments of the need to respect their commitment to press freedom. Moreover, it is an opportunity to celebrate the fundamental principles of press freedom; to assess the state of press freedom across the world; to defend the media from attacks on their independence; and to pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the line of duty.

In 2020, celebration of this day is being overshadowed by the global COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic had robbed us of the lives of thousands, while also inflicting heavy financial repercussions on our economies and fundamental principles of media freedom.

Journalists and media freedoms across the countries in all European neighboring regions from the EU Eastern Partnership countries to the Western Balkans, to the MENA region in the South have all been severely wounded by this crisis. Independent media in the European Eastern Neighborhood, especially the small- and medium-sized outlets, which have for a long time been competing with Russia supported outlets that disseminate the pro-Kremlin disinformation including on Covid-19, have suffered the most.

Since mid-March 2020, when governments imposed quarantine regimes, opportunities for independent media to survive and thrive have been decimated as advertising and other

sources of financial income have fallen drastically in the EaP region. The gap between the needs of media and available resources – always present – has widened significantly. In turn, national governments have used the pretext of COVID-19 crisis to curtail media freedoms. There are risks of media capture by actors whose vested interests puts media freedoms at risk. The recorded cases range from limiting access to public information in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova, to an outright crackdown on journalists and civil activists in Azerbaijan and Belarus, to lack of action to protect the rights of journalists by law enforcement agencies in Ukraine.

The undersigned organisations have a long history of supporting independent media as the key pillar of democratic development of EaP countries. Therefore, we call on you not to limit your support to political dialogue and encourage you to intensify media development support in the following direction:

- **Allocate additional funding for immediate support to cover the gaps caused by the pandemic.** External grant support should go to and be accessible to independent media who struggle to survive due to COVID-19 and a national lockdown that restricts media reporting on issues of vital importance to their audience;
- **Provide funding and support for robust audience research and media business skills development** to help EaP media outlets use their limited financial and human resources to increase their audience reach and financial viability, thinking also beyond the timeline of pandemic;
- **Increase support for regional initiatives** to improve media literacy, address disinformation and foster critical thinking among the national public.

We thank you in advance for taking our concerns into consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Baltic Centre of Media Excellence

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Academy of Ukrainian Press (Ukraine)

Association of Independent Press (Moldova)

Association of Publishers of Regional Press “United Mass Media” (Belarus)

Baku Press Club (Azerbaijan)

Belarus Association of Journalists (Belarus)

Broadcasting Monitoring Center (Azerbaijan)

Caucasus School of Journalism and Media Management of the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (Georgia)

Center for Information Support of Civic Initiatives “Third Sector” (Belarus)

Center for Investigative Journalism from Moldova (Moldova)

Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression (Armenia)

Detector Media (Ukraine)

Donetsk Institute of Information (Ukraine)

Electronic Press Association (Moldova)

Freedom House Moldova (Moldova)

Freedom of Information Center of Armenia (Armenia)

Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics (Georgia)

Gori Press Club (Armenia)

Independent Journalism Centre (Moldova)

Independent TV Journalists’ Association (Moldova)

Internews Ukraine (Ukraine)

IREX Europe in Moldova (Moldova)

Internews Azerbaijan (Azerbaijan)

Journalism Resource Center (Georgia)

Journalists for the Future (Armenia)

Media Development Foundation (Georgia)

Media Initiatives Center (Armenia)

Najaf Najafov Foundation (Azerbaijan)

Public Journalism Club (Armenia)

Ukrainian Association of Media Business (Ukraine)

Union of Journalists of Azerbaijan (Azerbaijan)

Ziarul de Garda (Moldova)

Yeni Nesil (Azerbaijan)

Yerevan Press Club (Armenia)