



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe  
The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media  
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**OSCE SOUTH EAST EUROPE MEDIA CONFERENCE CONCLUSIONS  
AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The 10th regional South East Europe Media Conference “Actioning Media Viability for Informed, Resilient Societies”, organized by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, in collaboration with the OSCE field operations in the region, was held in Sarajevo on 29 and 30 May 2025.

The two-day event brought together over 130 participants from the region and beyond, including journalists, legal and media experts, civil society actors, government representatives, international organizations, and academics. They reflected on the broad, multi-stakeholder commitment to strengthening media systems across the region.

The conference featured expert plenaries and interactive sessions, providing a timely platform for open and in-depth discussions on the challenges and opportunities facing media viability in today's increasingly complex information landscape. Discussions centred on strengthening the operational, financial and editorial independence of both public service and private media, while exploring innovative and collaborative approaches to support fact-based and quality journalism that serves the public interest.

Participants highlighted the urgent need for comprehensive, gender-responsive protective and preventative measures to safeguard public interest journalism from all forms of threats – including physical, legal, political, technological and economic – in line with the 2018 OSCE Ministerial Council Decision on Safety of Journalists.

Recognizing the value of young voices in the public sphere, the conference actively involved young journalists, who shared their perspectives on key media freedom issues. They also participated in a practical training on safety tools for reporting in high-risk environments and engaged in a dedicated session focused on shaping a Public Interest Framework for the future of journalism.

Drawing from the sessions held on the above topics, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media presents the following non-exhaustive conclusions and recommendations based on the two-day conference. These recommendations are intended for a wide range of stakeholders, including regional policymakers and authorities at all levels, academics, media organizations, civil society, international actors engaged in the region, intermediaries and regulators, journalists' unions and associations, and journalists themselves.

## **PLENARY SESSIONS – DAY 1: 29 MAY 2025**

### **PLENARY I: Safety of journalists – The costs of reporting the facts**

This session explored the growing risks to journalist safety and emphasized the urgent need to act on the commitments made in the 2018 OSCE Ministerial Council Decision. Panellists highlighted the complex nature of the threats journalists face today — including physical and verbal attacks, legal harassment, surveillance, and online abuse. Particular concern was raised over the rise in targeted harassment of women journalists, often amplified by AI-powered tools.

Participants further underscored the troubling normalization of threats against journalists and the lack of timely and effective institutional responses. This failure

not only leaves many journalists vulnerable to further attacks, but also contributes to long-term psychological harm. While experts acknowledged existing protection mechanisms, they stressed the urgent need to adapt these tools into comprehensive, gender-responsive frameworks to effectively address current challenges. A recurring recommendation was the establishment of dedicated co-ordination mechanisms to systematically monitor and report threats, enabling data-driven responses that strengthen journalist protection and ensure accountability.

### **Recommendations:**

- All attacks on journalists – whether physical, online, legal, or those taking place within political discourse or during public events – must be unequivocally and consistently condemned to safeguard journalists' safety, uphold public trust in their work, and reinforce the vital role of independent journalism in democracy.
- Strengthen legal frameworks by formally recognizing journalists as a protected group, enabling *ex-officio* investigations, enforcing stricter penalties, and ensuring effective access to justice and remedies.
- Establish co-ordinated procedures within law enforcement agencies and prosecutors' offices, including designated contact points and gender-responsive protocols, to ensure thorough follow-up on all reported threats and attacks, including undue digital surveillance.
- Provide continuous training for law enforcement, prosecutors, and judges on OSCE commitments and international human rights standards related to media freedom and journalist safety, to strengthen prevention, protection and prosecution efforts.
- Develop or, where necessary, reinforce existing multi-stakeholder co-ordination platforms where needed – involving media associations, journalists, law enforcement, and prosecutors – to facilitate information exchange, address urgent cases, share good practices, and propose needed reforms.
- Establish dedicated mechanisms to monitor, collect and analyse data on attacks and threats against journalists, with attention to gender-specific risks, to support targeted, evidence-based responses. Simultaneously, encourage journalists to actively report threats and attacks.
- Express solidarity with journalists facing challenges and provide a strong duty of care to all affected journalists – with particular attention to local

and freelance journalists – by offering legal assistance, psychological and peer support.

- Uphold high ethical and professional standards in media reporting to ensure quality, fact-based journalism and public trust. Simultaneously, promote media literacy to highlight the value of independent journalism and counter disinformation that undermines media freedom and journalist safety.

## **PLENARY II: Legal and regulatory trends shaping media freedom and viability**

This session examined the growing legal and regulatory pressures on independent media in South East Europe and beyond, highlighting how these trends undermine journalistic freedom and accountability in democratic societies. A key issue discussed was the proliferation of “foreign agent” laws, which stigmatize media outlets receiving foreign funding by imposing burdensome registration and reporting requirements, along with disproportionately severe sanctions for non-compliance, including bans on media organizations’ operations. Panellists emphasized the need to repeal such restrictive legislation, warning that it risks undermining the functioning and credibility of independent journalism, as well as the free flow of information, essential to a free and open society and accountable systems of government.

Another key topic of discussion was the growing use of SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) by public officials and private actors to silence public interest journalism. Often disguised as defamation or data protection claims, these lawsuits exploit the judicial system to intimidate media outlets and individual journalists – particularly those engaged in investigative reporting – by draining their financial and emotional resources through lengthy and costly proceedings. Panellists highlighted the significant power imbalance between plaintiffs and affected journalists and media outlets, emphasizing the chilling effect of such prolonged legal battles. In response, they called for comprehensive legal reforms, including the full decriminalization of defamation, procedural safeguards for early dismissal of SLAPPs, peer support networks, and emergency legal and financial assistance for impacted journalists and media organizations.

## **Recommendations:**

- Strengthen national legal frameworks to prevent legal harassment and abuse of the judicial system against independent media, with clear procedures to identify and dismiss SLAPP cases at early stages of litigation.
- Leverage existing EU instruments – such as the Media Freedom Act, the Anti-SLAPP Directive, and relevant recommendations from the Council of Europe and the European Commission – to ensure robust national protections for affected journalists and media outlets against SLAPPs.
- State authorities should fully decriminalize defamation laws and ensure that civil penalties are proportionate and do not threaten journalists' safety or their livelihood. Special attention must be given to local reporters, who often lack institutional protection and financial resources.
- Strengthen alliances among media organizations to monitor SLAPP lawsuits, advocate against harmful legislation like “foreign agent” laws through legal reforms, and foster solidarity within the media sector – especially supporting local, smaller outlets, and freelance journalists.
- Ensure journalists targeted by SLAPPs have access to free emergency legal aid and financial support to effectively exercise their right to defence and address the common financial imbalance between parties involved. Community-based crowdfunding can also serve as a valuable resource in sustain their defence.
- Provide targeted training for legal professionals, including judges, to raise awareness about the chilling effect SLAPPs can have on media freedom and freedom of expression, equipping them to identify and effectively address such legal threats.

## **PLENARY III: Rethinking the economics of public interest journalism in the era of Big Tech and AI**

This session examined the deepening economic challenges confronting public interest journalism in the digital era, particularly in the context of Big Tech dominance and the rise of generative AI. Panellists highlighted the collapse of traditional revenue streams – declining print circulation, shrinking advertising income, and reduced visibility due to AI-driven search algorithms – as key threats to media viability.

The industry's growing dependence on Big Tech platforms was seen as intensifying financial instability, with concerns raised about unfair competition, insufficient regulatory oversight, and a lack of transparency in media ownership. Local journalism was identified as especially vulnerable, prompting fears of expanding “news deserts” in the absence of targeted policy interventions and funding support. In response, panellists advocated for diversified and innovative funding models, including a mix of public financing, donor grants, and fair revenue-sharing arrangements with tech platforms – all grounded in a human rights-based approach. They also emphasized the importance of ethical AI deployment, rebuilding audience trust, and evolving content formats to adapt to changing consumption habits.

### **Recommendations:**

- Strengthen legal frameworks to ensure a safer, more equitable online environment for public interest journalism. This should include adopting a human rights-based approach to platform regulation and content governance, safeguarding journalistic freedoms and ensuring accountability. It also calls for the introduction of digital taxes on online platforms, alongside fair and transparent public financing mechanisms.
- Leverage the EU accession process by transposing the EU Media Freedom Act into national legislation to advance media reform and promote fairer negotiation terms with Big Tech platforms, enhancing the visibility, reach and financial viability of independent media.
- Invest in innovative business models and digital formats by leveraging audience analytics to better understand consumer preferences, developing new content formats such as podcasts, and integrating emerging technologies like AI-powered tools to offer niche services and improve content delivery.
- Diversify media outlets’ revenue streams by combining subscriptions, grants, and donor funding with alternative income sources such as offering training services, partnering with NGOs on communications projects, and content licensing.
- Prioritize direct engagement with audiences through market research and first-party data to tailor content to audience preferences, reducing dependence on Big Tech for visibility and revenue.
- Use AI tools responsibly and ethically, ensuring their application aligns with core journalistic principles of fairness, factuality, and accountability. This

should be supported by robust self-regulatory mechanisms to uphold these standards and sustain public trust in the media.

## **PLENARY IV: The future of Public Service Media in South East Europe**

This session underscored the vital role of Public Service Media (PSM) as a public good, essential for fostering social cohesion, an informed citizenry, and inclusive public dialogue in democratic societies. In light of mounting political interference, financial instability, and the growing influence of social media and unverified content, panellists stressed the urgent need to protect and invest in PSM across South East Europe. A key takeaway was the call for politically independent, well-resourced public broadcasters, supported by transparent, criteria-based funding and robust accountability frameworks.

Panellists also emphasized that PSM must adapt to the digital age by moving beyond outdated models to better engage diverse audiences – especially younger ones and underrepresented groups. As part of this transformation, experts proposed reclaiming the online public space through safe, transparent, and moderated platforms for information exchange – akin to social media, but grounded in the public interest rather than profit. The session concluded with a strong call to reimagine and revitalize PSM as a pillar of the media ecosystem, anchored in independence, accountability, inclusivity, and a renewed mission for the digital era.

### **Recommendations:**

- Establish clear and robust legal and institutional safeguards to prevent politically motivated appointments and dismissals within Public Service Media (PSM), including its governing bodies. This should include transparent, merit-based appointment processes and strong editorial charters to ensure political independence, effective governance, and accountability to the public.
- Ensure predictable and stable public funding for PSM, linked to clear public service mandates. This is essential to guarantee long-term financial sustainability, safeguard political independence, and support the production of high-quality content that serves all segments of society in the digital age.
- Promote digital innovation within PSM to adapt content for emerging platforms and technologies, expand online presence, and develop engaging formats that resonate with diverse audiences.



- Foster continuous dialogue with the public – particularly youth and underrepresented groups – to inform content creation, ensuring PSM remain relevant and responsive in the digital age.
- Promote media literacy initiatives for youth that highlight the role and societal benefits of PSM in supporting democracy and an informed citizenry. These efforts should be developed through collaboration between PSM, private media, and educational institutions to maximize impact.

## PARALLEL SESSIONS: DAY 2 – 30 MAY 2025

### **Session I: Putting the Media Viability Manifesto in action – exploring regional collaboration for media viability and resilience in South East Europe**

This panel explored the practical implementation of the [Media Viability Manifesto \(MVM\)](#) in South East Europe as a flexible, yet pragmatic, collaborative framework to support the viability of independent public interest media. Jointly developed by a core group of 13 media development and support organizations, the MVM sets out shared principles and definitions, strategic actions, and collective advocacy to enhance media viability. Panellists identified key challenges such as political and economic pressures, media ownership concentration, declining donor support, and inconsistent legal enforcement. These difficulties are compounded by declining adherence to ethical standards in journalism and the marginalization of local and community media.

The resulting environment is characterized by economic vulnerability and limited professional capacity, including restricted access to technology and skills development. Panellists emphasized the importance of continuous dialogue between media outlets and policymakers, alongside inclusive, locally tailored strategies to tackle these challenges. A key takeaway was the call for co-ordinated, participatory approaches that reflect the realities of the region and reinforce the resilience and sustainability of independent media.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Use the Media Viability Manifesto (MVM) to advocate for independent journalism as a public good, align media development with public policy, and institutionalize media viability principles for fair, transparent, and



sustained funding. This requires ongoing dialogue among media, donors, and policymakers, plus continuous monitoring to support evidence-based, responsive actions that enhance media resilience and viability.

- Support media organizations in adopting innovative, sustainable business models that reduce donor dependency to ensure long-term financial viability and independence. This involves diversifying revenue streams, forming partnerships, and embracing community-based approaches.
- Prioritize funding and capacity-building for local and community media, ensuring transparent and equitable access to public and private funds to sustain access to public interest journalism at the grassroots level.
- Strengthen regional and cross-sector collaboration among media outlets, civil society, academia and the private sector (start-ups) to enhance resource sharing, drive innovation, and increase collective bargaining power – especially with tech platforms and policymakers – to support legal and regulatory reforms.
- Invest in public awareness campaigns and media literacy initiatives by partnering with the education system and civil society to help citizens recognize the value of quality journalism and its essential role in a democratic society.

## **Session II: Workshop for young journalists on safety in crisis situations**

This interactive session, led by an expert trainer from the International Training Center for the Safety of Journalists (ICSJ), equipped young journalists with practical tools to enhance their safety and preparedness in crisis environments. Using real-world scenarios and field-tested methods, the training focused on risk assessment and situational awareness in unpredictable reporting settings. Participants learned to view risk as a combination of likelihood and impact and applied the “ACT” (Actors & Agendas, Conditions & Context, and Tools & Tactics) framework to assess and respond to evolving safety threats in the field. The importance of dynamic assessment was emphasized, recognizing how rapidly situations can shift from safe to dangerous.

The session also introduced tools like the “OODA Loop” (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act) and Cooper Colour Code to support journalists’ mental and physical readiness. Psychological responses to high-stress events were discussed to help young journalists manage stress in real time. Participants also practiced developing personal safety plans, including preparedness toolkits with pre-assignment intelligence gathering, communication strategies, go-bags, and medical kits. They also

had an opportunity to engage in group discussions and share personal experiences, fostering peer learning and a sense of community among young journalists.

### **Key participant takeaways:**

- A deeper, operational understanding of risk assessment and situational awareness in the field
- Practical skills for developing safety plans and responding to threats with calm and efficiency.
- A strengthened peer network of young professionals committed to mutual support in high-risk reporting environments.

### **Session III: Boosting resilience to disinformation through fact-checking**

This session explored the growing role of fact-checking in countering disinformation and rebuilding public trust in media, especially online. Panellists underscored fact-checkers' contribution to quality journalism through claim verification, contextualization, and enhancing credibility amid rising public distrust and legal threats. They also highlighted challenges such as declining funding, limited government commitment, and the slow implementation of regional frameworks like the EU Digital Services Act (DSA), which require stronger political will. Legal complexities around verifying opinion and propaganda, as well as limited visibility of corrections, further complicate fact-checking efforts.

Participants highlighted the need for cross-border collaboration to address coordinated, state-linked disinformation campaigns targeting independent media. Strengthening media literacy and integrating it into education systems was identified as crucial for building societal resilience to disinformation. The session concluded by reaffirming the vital role of public interest journalism in defending democratic discourse and called for policy reforms, sustainable funding, and institutional support for fact-checkers.

### **Recommendations:**

- Promote media and digital literacy, especially through formal education and policy reforms, to help the public recognize disinformation and assess responsible political messaging.

- Advocate for institutional recognition of fact-checking as a public service, supported by dedicated public funding to reinforce public interest journalism and bolster societal resilience against disinformation.
- Promote media accountability by enforcing clear ownership disclosure, effective editorial oversight, and transparent fact-checking methods to proactively address disinformation on recurring topics.
- Integrate AI-driven tools within newsrooms to increase efficiency, speed, and reach of fact-checking efforts, helping detect and respond to disinformation at scale.
- Strengthen cross-border collaboration between media outlets and independent fact-checkers to improve the accuracy and quality of reporting. Ensure fair compensation and adequate protection for freelance journalists and fact-checkers engaged in this work.
- Update journalism education curricula to include digital safety, AI ethics, and platform accountability, equipping future journalists to navigate today's complex digital media environment more effectively.

## **Session IV: Youth consultation on the Public Interest Framework for the future of journalism**

This session brought together young journalists to reflect on journalism's future and the role of the Public Interest Framework (PIF). Participants emphasized journalism's democratic role in informing the public, promoting peace, and uncovering truth. At the same time, they voiced concerns about declining public trust, job insecurity, surveillance, SLAPPs, the impact of AI, and the dominance of fast-paced, social media-driven content. Regional data echoed these concerns, pointing to a drop in journalism students, increased media concentration and capture, and deteriorating working conditions. Traditional funding models are also under pressure, with advertising revenue shifting to Big Tech and limited public funds often distributed non-transparently.

In conclusion, participants viewed the PIF as a vital tool to reframe journalism not just as a matter of free expression, but as a public good essential to democracy and peace. They called for strong legal protections, institutional independence, cross-sector collaboration, and formal recognition of journalism's societal value.

## **Recommendations:**

- Encourage experimentation in formats and revenue models to engage younger audiences and marginalized communities.
- Media outlets should adopt and publish internal editorial and AI usage guidelines, strengthening their credibility and differentiation from influencers or disinformation sources.
- Partner with civil society organizations to educate the public, particularly youth, on recognizing credible journalism and its societal value.
- Focus on effective implementation of existing media laws through independent, well-resourced institutions.
- Address the dominance of tech giants through regulatory frameworks that ensure fair revenue distribution and algorithmic transparency to sustain high-quality journalism in the digital age.
- Recognize journalism as a societal right and necessity, not just a profession. A collective effort involving media, regulators, and civil society is essential for lasting impact.