

Brussels, 3 May 2022

“The European Union should be a beacon of press freedom in the World”

On World Press Freedom Day, European press publishers warn against interference with the freedom and pluralism of the media

On the occasion of the World Press Freedom Day, while Europe is in turmoil over an ongoing global pandemic and a war of aggression on our continent, EMMA and ENPA remind the importance of our fundamental rights and values as guiding principles for the European Union and warn against any interference with the freedom of the press, editorial freedom and freedom of expression, whether offline or online.

In these challenging times, a free press and the freedom to express diverse and pluralistic opinions are the bastions of our democracy. When democracy is in decline, attacks on media freedom and freedom of expression are the first signs of the rise of authoritarianism. Free and pluralistic information and thought are tyranny’s worst enemy. Where the free press is being silenced, other fundamental rights and freedoms are soon to vanish.

While the European Union positioned itself as a champion of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the world, we cannot but notice worrying trends in the EU also:

First of all, government interference in and encroachment on the diversity and pluralism of information, opinion and thought is rising in several Member States. While the free press is being undermined, democracy and rule of law are under threat in the EU.

However, there are more threats to press freedom. Global platforms have an increasing sway over the free flow of information, sources and opinions. Today, these digital players decide if, how, what and when readers can find, access and see any information online. As such, they should be bound by the respect of our fundamental rights and freedoms, or else they would become censors of information and opinion and become the very arbiters of truth.

With the Digital Services Act (DSA), we regret that the EU missed a crucial opportunity to secure our fundamental rights and values in the digital realm. To ensure that future generations enjoy the same freedoms online that previous generations fought for offline, the DSA provided the opportunity to establish not only that what is illegal offline must be illegal online, **but also that what is legal offline, must be legal online**. Instead, however, fearing the spread of foreign propaganda and harmful information, policymakers decided to hand over the control over the spread of information to a handful of private companies that govern the online space. On World Press Freedom Day, we therefore feel compelled to reiterate: **“The best way to fight ‘Fake News’ is more unfaked News!”**.

We are worried that the power for third parties to promote, demote or even remove legal content on the basis of alleged inaccuracy or (un)trustworthiness is a threat to our fundamental rights. We therefore must warn against any attempt by the European Union to carry forward

with such initiatives. Be it in the context of the fight against disinformation, of the DSA's codes of conduct or other upcoming political initiatives.

While we are observing issues in some Member States, other Member States of the European Union consistently stand out as the blueprints in the world for press and media freedom. It is precisely the absence of prescriptive government interference and regulation, that contributed to them becoming global examples of freedom and pluralism of the media. For this reason, we are concerned by potential plans to introduce further media regulation, including of the free and independent press at EU level. By definition, regulation limits freedom.

In the context of the current crises, we call upon the European Union and its Member States to always uphold the fundamental freedoms of the EU. Europe is and must be a beacon of press freedom of the world. However, to uphold this role, Europe must carry its core values and principles into the 21st century and into the digital space.

Ilias Konteas, Executive Director of EMMA and ENPA said: "A free press is essential to ensure a lively, critical and diverse democratic debate as well as to keep societies, economic and political actors under scrutiny. Every initiative to influence or restrict the free press, especially from those under scrutiny, raises our concern. We see how terrible the consequences can be when information is censored and manipulated. In the past weeks, information and the restriction thereof have been used as weapons. Nevertheless, information has also played an important role to inform citizens and increase solidarity, and the free press is up to the challenge. As such, the EU should take every opportunity to safeguard, esteem and increase press freedom."

EMMA, the European Magazine Media Association, is the unique and complete representation of Europe's magazine media, which is today enjoyed by millions of consumers on various platforms, encompassing both paper and digital formats. EMMA represents 15,000 publishing houses, publishing 50,000 magazine titles across Europe in print and digital.

See: www.magazinemedia.eu/

ENPA, the European Newspaper Publishers' Association (ENPA) is the largest representative body of newspaper publishers across Europe. ENPA advocates for 16 national associations across 13 European countries, and is a principal interlocutor to the EU institutions and a key driver of media policy debates in the European Union. See: www.enpa.eu/