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Media community from across the EU call the institutions to prioritise media freedom and sustainability

May 16 2018, Sofia, Bulgaria. A conference on press freedom took place on the fringes of the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia in Bulgaria which gathered journalists, media organisations, publishers, NGOs and members of the European parliament. Participants warned of the waning strength and independence of European media and the consequent threat to democracy. 21 years after the **UNESCO Sofia Declaration for a free and pluralistic media**, they published the 'Sofia Declaration', urging the EU to prioritise media freedom in Europe.

The participants representing the media sector across Europe pointed increasing political pressure and growing political control over media in a number of Central and Eastern European countries, namely Bulgaria, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Serbia. In addition the event strongly focused on sustainability of the business models of media and challenges associated with the digital transformation of traditional media.

The erosion of the European democratic model, a trend visible in recent years, is ongoing and becoming more and more worrying. The traditionally safe environment for journalists in Europe has begun to deteriorate as the region has been shaken by two murders and by threats to investigative reporters as well as unprecedented verbal attacks on the media.

Recent events in several of the EU member states clearly violate national and international law when it comes to protecting media freedom. The EU and the Council of Europe have established legal procedures for protecting freedom of expression in the Court of Justice of the European Union and the European Court of Human Rights. Nevertheless these structures are sometimes

insufficient to uphold and enforce the fundamental European values and their constitutional traditions.

The declaration pinpointed some practical measures to prevent the decline of European media :

- Newly proposed rules by the European Commission that would see the distribution of EU funds linked to the state of the rule of law in each country should also include indicators for media freedom. At this stage, the EU proposal to tie funding to the rule of law is too limited and does not explicitly mention freedom of the press as a precondition to receive European money.
- There is a need to develop mechanisms ensuring sustainable media financing: the Sofia declaration advocated the creation of a Media Freedom Advocacy Fund to assist activists and publishers in taking legal action against abuses of power by governments and to fund cross-border reporting and investigations.
- There is a need to ensure more effective copyright rules, modern VAT rules and fair E-privacy reform. Particularly, EU stakeholders must support the Publisher's Right in connection with the copyright reform in order to improve the level playing field with major digital platforms such as Facebook and Google and help them enforce their already existing intellectual property rights.

The declaration adopted at the end of the conference is an open document and will be further updated in the future with new cases and new countries.