

MONITORING MEDIA PLURALISM IN THE DIGITAL ERA

APPLICATION OF THE MEDIA PLURALISM MONITOR IN THE EUROPEAN UNION, ALBANIA, MONTENEGRO, REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA, SERBIA & TURKEY IN THE YEAR 2022

Country report: Cyprus

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Research Project Report

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1. About the project

1.1. Overview of the Project

The Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) is a research tool that is designed to identify potential risks to media pluralism in the Member States of the European Union and in Candidate Countries. This narrative report has been produced on the basis of the implementation of the MPM that was carried out in 2022. The implementation was conducted in 27 EU Member States, as well as in Albania, Montenegro, The Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey. This project, under a preparatory action of the European Parliament, was supported by a grant awarded by the European Commission to the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF) at the European University Institute.

1.2. Methodological notes

Authorship and Review

The CMPF partners with experienced, independent national researchers to carry out the data collection and to author the narrative reports, except in the case of Italy where data collection is carried out centrally by the CMPF team. The research is based on a standardised questionnaire that was developed by the CMPF.

In Cyprus the CMPF partnered with Christophoros Christophorou (Independent expert), Nicholas Karides (Institute for Mass Media, IMME), who conducted the data collection, scored and commented on the variables in the questionnaire and interviewed experts. The report was reviewed by the CMPF staff. Moreover, to ensure accurate and reliable findings, a group of national experts in each country reviewed the answers to particularly evaluative questions (see Annex II for the list of experts). For a list of selected countries, the final country report was peer-reviewed by an independent country expert.

Risks to media pluralism are examined in four main thematic areas: Fundamental Protection, Market Plurality, Political Independence and Social Inclusiveness. The results are based on the assessment of a number of indicators for each thematic area (see Table 1).

Fundamental Protection	Market Plurality	Political Independence	Social Inclusiveness
Protection of freedom of expression	Transparency of media ownership	Political independence of the media	Representation of minorities
Protection of right to information	Plurality of media providers	Editorial autonomy	Local/regional and community media
Journalistic profession, standards and protection	Plurality in digital markets	Audiovisual media, online platforms and elections	Gender equality in the media
Independence and effectiveness of the media authority	Media viability	State regulation of resources and support to the media sector	Media Literacy
Universal reach of traditional media and access to the Internet	Editorial independence from commercial and owners' influence	Independence of PSM	Protection against disinformation and hate speech

Table 1: Areas and Indicators of the Media Pluralism Monitor

The Digital Dimension

The Monitor does not consider the digital dimension to be an isolated area but, rather, as being intertwined with the traditional media and the existing principles of media pluralism and freedom of expression. Nevertheless, the Monitor also extracts digitally specific risk scores, and the report contains a specific analysis of the risks that related to the digital news environment.

The Calculation of Risk

The results for each thematic area and Indicator are presented on a scale from 0 to 100%.

Scores between 0% and 33%: low risk

Scores between 34% and 66%: medium risk

Scores between 67% and 100%: high risk

With regard to the Indicators, scores of 0 are rated as 3%, while scores of 100 are rated as 97%, by default, in order to avoid an assessment that offers a total absence, or certainty, of risk.

Methodological Changes

For every edition of the MPM, the CMPF updates and fine-tunes the questionnaire, based on the evaluation of the tool after its implementation, the results of previous data collection and the existence of newly available data. For the MPM 2023, no major changes were made to the questionnaire, except for the Indicators Transparency of Media Ownership, Plurality in Digital Markets and Editorial Independence from Commercial and Owners Influence (Market Plurality area), and Protection Against Disinformation and Hate Speech (Social Inclusiveness area). The results obtained for these indicators are therefore not strictly comparable with those results obtained in the previous edition of the MPM. The methodological changes are explained on the CMPF website at <http://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor/>.

In the Market Plurality area, the names of three Indicators have changed. The former indicator on "News Media Concentration" is now named "Plurality of Media Providers"; "Online Platforms and Competition Enforcement" has been renamed as "Plurality in Digital Markets"; "Commercial & Owners' Influence Over Editorial Content" has been renamed as "Editorial Independence from Commercial and Owner Influence".

Disclaimer: The content of the report does not necessarily reflect the views of the CMPF, nor the position of the members composing the Group of Experts. It represents the views of the national country team who carried out the data collection and authored the report. Due to updates and refinements in the questionnaire, MPM2023 scores may not be fully comparable with those in the previous editions of the MPM. For more details regarding the project, see the CMPF report on MPM2023, which is available on: <http://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor/>.

2. Introduction

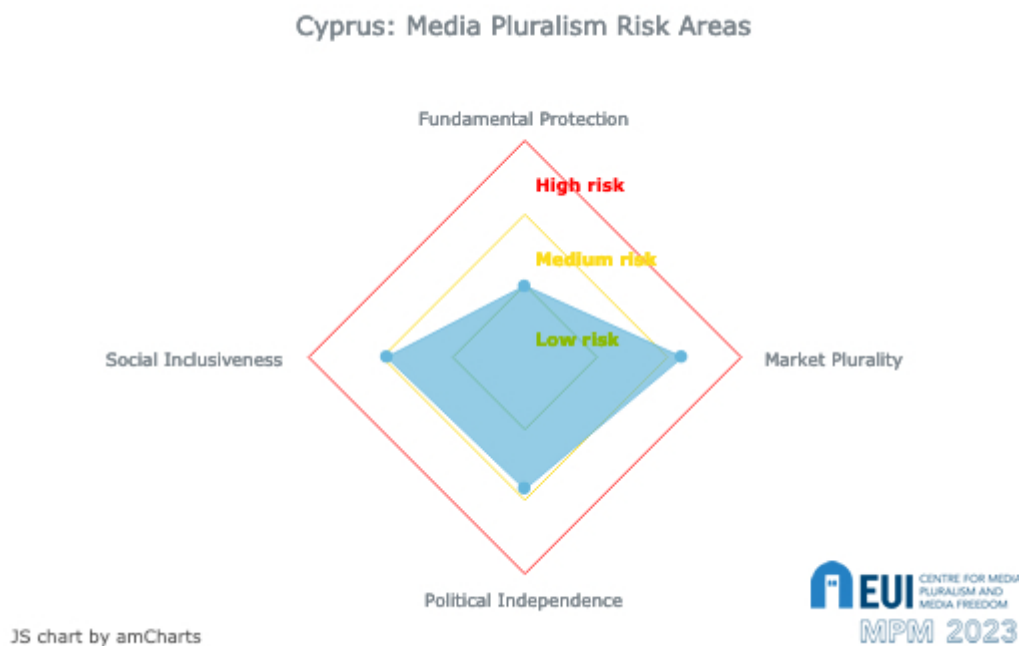
- **Population:** Cyprus has an area of 9,251 km² with a de jure population of 918,100 (census 2021).
- **Languages:** The official languages are Greek and Turkish.
- **Minorities:** The 1960 Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus recognises two power-sharing communities, the Greek and the Turkish communities. These live segregated since the collapse of the bi-communal arrangement in 1964 and the 1974 Turkish invasion that has since de facto divided the island. The Republic of Cyprus is a member of the EU with the *acquis communautaire* suspended in the part of the island which is not under the effective control of the government of the Republic. Many rounds of negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations aiming to end the division have so far proved unproductive. Armenians, Maronites and Latins are recognised as religious groups. They were given the option in 1960 to 'join' either one of the two communities, and they chose the Greek community. They constitute around 1.3% of the Greek Cypriot community. The total number of foreign nationals, according to the 2021 census, amounted to 193,300 and corresponded to 21.1% of the total population. EU and non-EU citizens represented 10.9% and 11.04% of the employed labour, respectively, in 2021.
- **Economic situation:** The economy recorded steady growth rates in the previous decade following the exit from an EC-ECB-IMF program that aimed to assist Cyprus after the economic collapse of 2013. The recovery was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic with Cyprus' GDP recording a 5.2% decline in 2020 which was later reversed with growth rates of 5.7% in 2021 and 5.8% in 2022^[1] mostly on the back of strong tourism years as arrivals regained lost ground during the pandemic and reached 80% of the 2019 levels. Despite rising inflation (8.1% in 2022), caused by the energy crisis, private consumption remained strong, supported by increased employment and underpinned by targeted government measures to compensate for high energy prices. The unemployment rate in the last quarter of 2022 stood at 6.9% of the labour force compared to 6.3% in the corresponding quarter of 2021.
- **Political situation:** For decades traditionally strong trade unions and a clear left-right polarisation dominated social and political life but since the rejection of the UN settlement plan of the Cyprus Problem and membership to the EU in 2004 and later the collapse of the economy in 2013 the country's political and socio-economic landscape has been in transition. An unprecedented level of political alienation of citizens has been evident, made worse by a series of cases of corruption of state officials and the firm conviction of the public about the unwillingness to tackle it. In the May 2021 parliamentary elections, seven parties entered the 56-seat House of Representatives, while smaller parties that gathered 14% of the vote in total were excluded because they did not reach the threshold (3.5%). The abstention rate increased slightly compared to 2016, to 34.3%. Abstention was worse at 55% in the 2019 European Parliament elections. The strongest evidence of the considerable shift in the political landscape of Cyprus was the election in February 2023 of president Nicos Christodoulides, the first time a president came to power without the support of one of the two main political parties of the left and the right. Executive power lies with the President and his Council of Ministers.
- **Media market:** The shift towards online media, which had grown significantly during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, appears to have stabilised in 2022. However, no audited figures are any more published by online publishers (publication stopped since February 2022). Conversely, the

audience of newspapers is declining: In the absence of any audited data, readability is measured. Data and information below are from Gnora MediaGnosis report for the October-December 2022 period^[NOTA_3133], according to which, readability was at 7.1% in weekdays, in progress by 1.1 percentage point from the same period in 2021, but it receded by 4.1 points compared to the same period in 2020. Similar picture for Sunday papers, with 9.8% in 2022 against 6.4% in 2021, it receded by 5.6 points from 2020. Readability for Saturday papers dropped from 17.2% in 2020 to 13.8% in 2021 and 11.3% in 2022. Legacy newspapers have retained strong portals and online editions, in competition with several digital native content news organisations. In radio, the PSM Triton is on top with 16.4% followed by Kanali 6 at 11.8% and radio Proto at 9.7%. In television, Alpha is leading with 15.8%, followed by ANT1 at 11.4% and Omega at 10.9%. Night news bulletins of Alpha are also on top (15.2%), followed by ANT1 (13.5%) and RIK (PSM) at 12.8%. The internet service provider (ISP) market in Cyprus is dominated by only four players that cover 100 per cent of the market. Data by the Office of the Commissioner for Electronic Communications and Postal Regulation for the first half of 2022 showed that CYTA holds the biggest market share with 57.6%, followed by Cablenet with 23.4%, Primetel with 12% and the fourth EPIC with 6.9%. A Cyprus Union of Journalists' opinion survey conducted in July 2022 showed that television remains the prime source of information on issues that interest the public (74%), followed by social media (68%), radio (46%), portals (44%) with print newspapers trailing at 11%.

- **Regulatory environment:** The media regulatory framework for both the commercial media and the PSM, which had remained unchanged since the mid-2011 transition to digital television, was updated in December 2021 with the transposition of the 2018/1808 AVMS EU Directive into Cyprus Law. There is still no regulatory framework for the digital media domain, while the Press law L. 145/1989 has since 1989 not been updated and large parts of it remain inoperative.
- Overall **media viability** remains precarious, with media organisations struggling to survive post Covid-19 and following the Russian invasion in Ukraine. Online is seemingly doing well, with radio stagnant in late 2021 and in 2022. The absence of reliable metrics mask the seriousness of the situation while, similarly, the absence of data about beneficial ownership of the print and digital domain mask the seriousness of the **media pluralism** issues that exist in the country. There have been some layoffs of journalists while pressures on salaries and benefits persist with the entire media sector from news organisations, newsrooms and journalists themselves fighting for credibility and for the public's trust.

3. Results of the data collection: Assessment of the risks to media pluralism

The state of media pluralism in Cyprus has remained rather stagnant over the years. In 2022, the only area that showed improvement in the risk level is **Social Inclusiveness**, dropping from high to medium range. A deterioration recorded in **Fundamental Protection** placed this area in the lower part of medium risk range, while **Political Independence** moved near the top of medium risk. **Market Plurality** faced more threats in 2022 and is the only area that remains within the high risk range. The evaluation of indicators and areas as high risk are often due to either a lack of data or changes in the methodological approach. Increases in risk scoring reflect the absence of concern by the authorities to update an obsolete regulatory framework or introduce new rules.



Unexpectedly, a new factor negatively impacted on the risk evaluation of the present report; the denial by the State's Press and Information Office^[3] to provide information and data on State resources made available in any form to media. This points to a lack of transparency and violation of the FOI law of 2017. Our complaint for denial of information was rejected by the Commissioner of Information on the ground that **state expenses to the media is sensitive information that may damage their commercial interests**^[4] .

The risk level to **Fundamental Protection** of freedom of expression has again increased to 33% after it had receded to 29% in 2021. The improvement recorded in our previous report following the adoption and implementation of laws on the **Protection of the right to information** and on the **Protection of whistleblowers** suffered a serious drawback; this was caused by non-respect of the respective law provisions. The authors of this report were denied provision of information on State resources to the media, while two prominent cases, of a whistleblower and corruption targeting the Director of Prisons were handled inadequately. The situation regarding the indicator **Journalistic profession standards and protection** has also deteriorated, while **Protection of freedom of expression** and **Independence and effectiveness of the Media Authority** remained at the same risk level. A significant improvement has been recorded for the **Universal Reach of Traditional media and access to the Internet**, because of technological upgrades, the rate of connections to broadband and access speeds.

The situation in **Market Plurality** has deteriorated with the risk increasing to 73%. Four indicators remain

within the range of high risk with the same problems persisting. The only sector regulated in ways to guarantee ownership transparency and avoid market dominance is that of radio and AVMS. Full implementation of this regulation is problematic because of the absence of any similar rules for the written press and of any rules at all for digital media. This remains a serious threat to pluralism as does the lack of rules to limit horizontal and cross-media concentration in these sectors. Media viability was at higher risk in 2022 because of the state of the economy, high inflation and a decline in media revenues. This resulted in higher pressures on journalists, with safety of employment and influence from businesses and owners taking precedence over editorial independence.

The area of **Political Independence** recorded an increased risk from 57% to 61%, remaining within the boundaries of medium risk. Three indicators showed no change. Media coverage of elections was affected by heavy involvement of the government in electioneering, which upset the balance of the campaign effort of candidates to the February 2023 presidential elections. Generally, political interference in the media and the PSM remain strong. The higher risk rise was recorded in the indicator of State resources to the media, because of absence of data and information; the competent government authorities refused to make them available to the authors.

The **Social Inclusiveness** area has shown improvement and is placed from high (69%) to the medium risk (64%) range. However, the change is due to methodological reasons than changes on the ground. In reality, access to the media continued to be mostly reserved to mainstream groups, with little or no space offered to communities and minorities. Positive trends in the Access to media for women are reversed in 2022, while more activity in schools in the field of Media Literacy has improved the score, which however is not satisfactory.

Focus on the digital environment

Fundamental Protection

In the absence of any regulatory framework on online communication, the existing rules for traditional communication and legacy media apply.

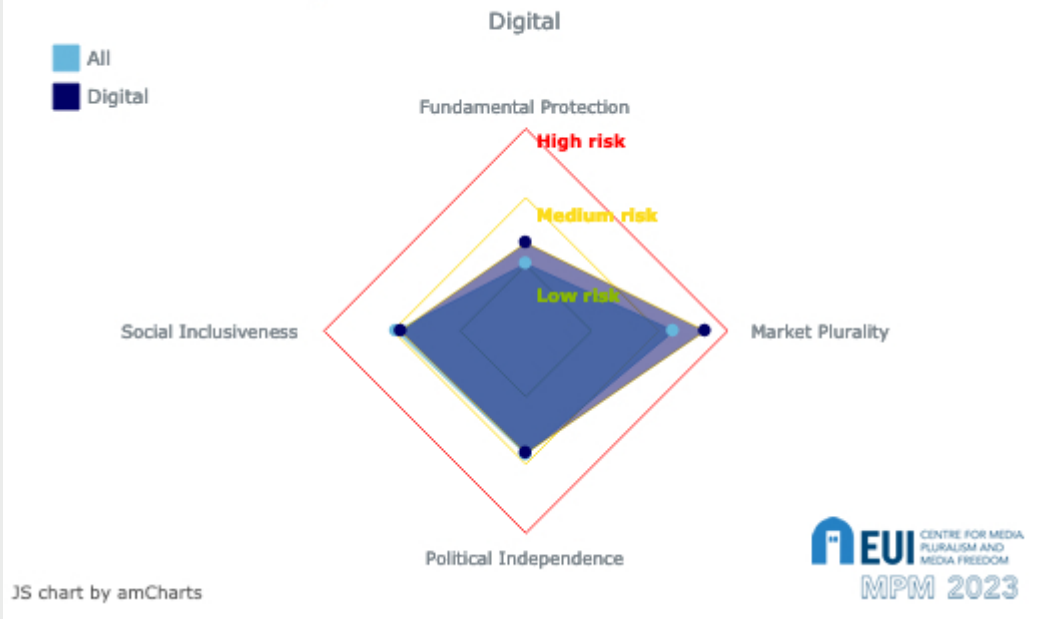
Market Plurality

Since no rules at all exist on the online environment, digital media operate unregulated, with no obligation under the law to disclose ownership or other details (except under the Company law). No thresholds on capital share or other constraints exist and the exact picture of the digital environment is in a grey zone.

Political Independence

The authors of the report have no concrete information about political links or influence on digital media. One could assume that attempts and concrete action on behalf of the incumbent government and business people to control media could also apply to digital media.

Cyprus: Media Pluralism Risk Areas



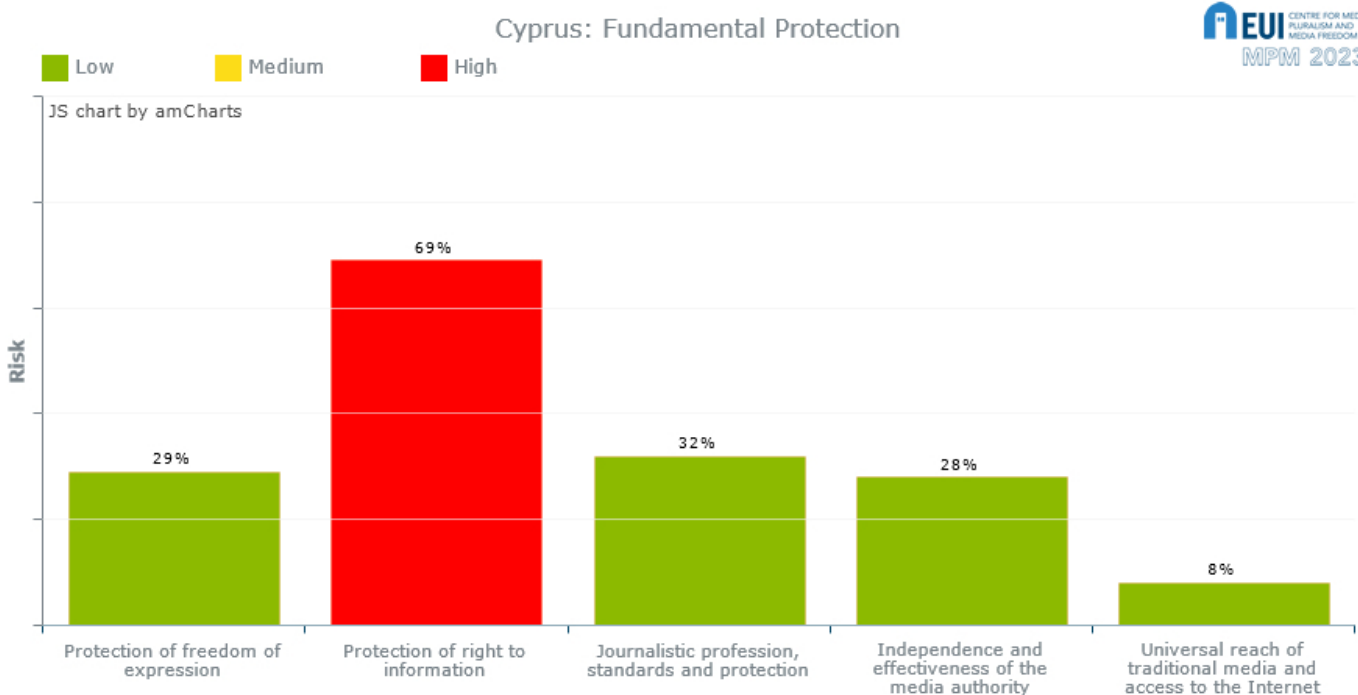
Social Inclusiveness

No regulatory framework or specific plans exist for countering disinformation and hate speech online.

3.1. Fundamental Protection (33% - low risk)

The Fundamental Protection indicators represent the regulatory backbone of the media sector in every contemporary democracy. They measure a number of potential areas of risk, including the existence and effectiveness of the implementation of regulatory safeguards for freedom of expression and the right to information; the status of journalists in each country, including their protection and ability to work; the independence and effectiveness of the national regulatory bodies that have the competence to regulate the media sector, and the reach of traditional media and access to the Internet.

The risk level in the area of **Fundamental Protection** of freedom of expression has again increased to 33% after it had receded from 33% (2020) to 29% in 2021. We note a significant deterioration of the indicator the Protection of the right to information (from 44% to 69%); this is because the improvement brought by the promulgation of laws on FOI and protection of whistleblowers, which enhanced the de jure situation was not followed by respect of the rights protected when critical cases emerged. There is also a slight decline regarding the indicator Journalistic profession, standards and protection, because of the more pressures on the profession. The situation regarding the Independence and effectiveness of the Media Authority remained stable at low risk, while the risk level for Universal reach of traditional media and access to the Internet further improved to a very low rate.



Protection of freedom of expression remains at the same level of risk (29%) as in the previous report. Cyprus is a signatory member without any reservations of the international instruments for the protection of Human Rights, the ECHR and the ICCPR. Its Constitution and laws are in line with the universal standards set in them and courts deliberate in compliance with these standards. The Republic is among the few countries that decriminalised defamation since 2003^[6], but has no anti-SLAPP law. In all cases, persons have legal remedies to claim respect of their right to free expression, which is, however, 'hindered' by an extremely slow justice system.

In 2022, there were again incidents of threats for legal action against journalists and others by State officials and the President of the Republic^[6], and acting in ways contrary to their obligation to proactively create an

enabling environment for free expression. Silence, threats and censorship were observed on claims of corruption and there were attempts by the Presidential Palace to control and manipulate the media. This was particularly with regard to books^[7] published by a former aide of the President and to other cases.

The risk level for the **Protection of the right to information** has shown a spectacular increase from medium at 44% in 2021 to high at 69%. There was a positive note after the promulgation, since late 2020 of the Law on the Right to Access Information Held by Public Authorities L. 184(I)/2017^[8], in which restrictions to access and other aspects are defined in accordance with international standards. However, our examination of samples of the “publication plan” which is an obligation for public law bodies and the administration to draw has shown that this limits critically the right to access and leaves room for arbitrariness.

Our request to the relevant authority of data on grants, the allocation of official advertising expenses to media and other information was not satisfied on the basis of unjustified arguments. This kind of data had been supplied to the authors of this report annually since 2017. No answer has so far been received to our latest letter to the authorities asking them to legally justify their refusal (4 January 2023). The decision of 15/5/2023 of the Commissioner of Information to our complaint is erroneous and unfounded.^[9]

A positive development in 2022 was the vote of the Law on the Protection of Persons that Report on Violations of the EU and National Law L.6(I)/2022^[10], protecting whistleblowers. Despite this, two prominent cases seemingly cancelled the implementation of this law. After a complaint that she was the target of a case of corruption, corroborated by an independent investigator appointed by the Attorney General, the Director of Prisons saw herself targeted by the Law Office of the Republic through three successive investigations (failed in the end), while no charges were brought to the person investigated for corruption^[11]. In March 2023, the Attorney General blocked a private criminal lawsuit against the suspect filed by the Director of Prisons. Also, a former aide of the President who published claims of corruption and made a complaint that his computer and mobile telephone had been hacked was threatened with legal action and smeared by officials and the President in the media^[12].

The above serious cases show that the adoption of laws have not led to effective implementation.

The indicator **Journalistic profession, standards and protection**, has an increased risk level, from 28% to 32%. However, in the absence of any recent survey, in reality, problems might be more serious and the risk might be even higher. Journalism has been negatively affected by the general economic situation and the broader issue of surveillance, which is being examined by the European Parliament. The deterioration of the economy and high inflation rates have further increased pressures on the status and working conditions of media professionals.

Although no formal or other obstacles hinder in any way access to the journalistic profession and strong labour laws do guarantee the status of all employed persons, uncertainty of employment has increased. It appears to have made the position of the Union of Journalists and of journalists themselves more precarious who face the dilemma of whether to fight to safeguard editorial independence or try to safeguard their labour rights. While not abandoning the former, efforts clearly focused more on the latter. Thus, more layoffs took place in 2022 with limited reaction for an additional reason: Claiming rights before the courts may take years to resolve, which leads to compromises. On another level, interference by media owners and self-censorship are taking place, as stated by journalists themselves.

Courts implicitly recognise the secrecy of sources, while derogations in the law transposing the GDPR Directive ensure journalistic protection. Retention of telecommunications data is effected with respect to articles 8 and 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Despite decriminalisation of libel, SLAPP cases threaten media freedoms, while no anti-SLAPP legislation exists.

No physical attacks against journalists have been recorded in 2022.

No change has been recorded for the **Independence and effectiveness of the Media Authority**, with the risk remaining at 28%. The law on Radio and Television Organisations L. 7(I)/1998^[13] has established an authority independent from political influence, with its own budget and resources. Its decisions are immediately executable, subject to review only by courts. With the transposition of the AVMS Directive 2018/1808, new provisions aim at explicitly confirming and enhancing this independence. Some drawbacks in the work of the Authority are the absence of strategic planning, limited transparency on its work, other than decisions imposing sanctions for violations of the law, and limited regulatory work.

Selection and appointment criteria of the chairperson and members of the Authority are very generic, while appointment lies exclusively with the powers of the Council of Ministers.

For the first time since 2009, the publication of an annual activity report for 2022 is expected in 2023, following an obligation set in the law in December 2021.

Universal reach of traditional media and access to the Internet is the indicator with the best rate, following several years during which Cyprus trailed behind most other EU countries in respect of access to the Internet. The risk rate has declined from 33% in 2020 to 15% in 2021 and to 8% in 2022. The public service media (PSM) and broadband coverage are at 100%, access to broadband is 93.4% of households and Internet speeds are at 38.52 mbps^[14]. The situation in respect of net neutrality is at low risk. The only problem is that four internet service providers (ISP) operators are present in the market, limiting options for users.

Focus on the digital environment

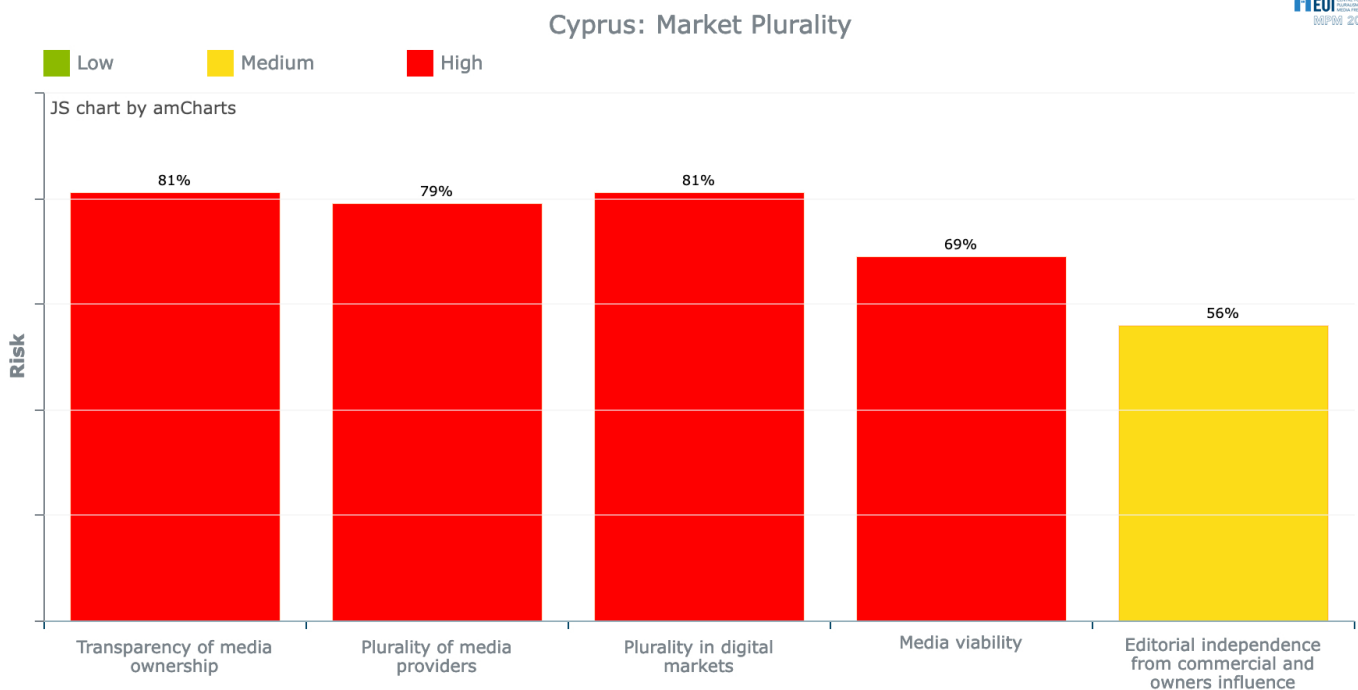
There is no law specific to online media and communication and relevant issues are dealt with under laws on traditional communication. Neither the government nor platforms publish any reports on online interference, filtering or removing content. Limited or no transparency regarding requests for data and preservation to online platforms create grey areas regarding respect of free expression.

The digital safety of citizens and journalists alike remained an issue in 2022. Cyprus has served as a hub for the sale of surveillance equipment and software. A former journalist and former presidential aide has provided independent evidence that corroborate his claims that his laptop and mobile telephone had been hacked. Secrecy and lack of transparency from the authorities entertain existing suspicions that they practice surveillance beyond the scope of legitimate security concerns.

3.2. Market Plurality (73% - high risk)

The Market Plurality area considers the economic dimension of media pluralism, assessing the risks deriving from insufficient transparency in media ownership, the concentration of the market in terms of both production and distribution, the sustainability of media content production, and the influence of commercial interests and ownership on editorial content. The actors included in the assessment are media content providers, with indicators including Transparency of media ownership, Plurality of media providers, Media viability, Editorial independence from commercial and ownership influence, and digital intermediaries (with the indicator on Plurality in digital markets).

The area of **Market Plurality** is the worst performing sector in the broader context of media pluralism, with four indicators in the high-risk zone. The scores for **Transparency of media ownership**, **Plurality of media providers** and **Plurality in digital markets** remain stagnant at high risk, at around 80%. Media viability is also at high risk, up from medium risk in 2021, while Editorial independence from commercial and owner influence records an increased risk, albeit remaining within medium level.



Transparency of media ownership remains stagnant at high risk (81%), pointing to a very problematic situation for two main reasons: On the one hand, the complete absence of regulation for digital media and of ownership transparency obligations for print media and, on the other, the inefficiency of the law on AVMS providers in fully ensuring ownership information. Thresholds in shareholding and other constraints applied by law to AVMS providers seem at first sight effective, but there are doubts in respect of verifying beneficial /ultimate ownership. In addition, conditions on thresholds in the law on Radio and Television Organisations 7(I)1998^[15] linked to ownership in print media cannot be verified and enforced without transparency in the latter. The above result comes in a context where, cross-media shareholding in AVMS is not fully transparent, no ownership data is available to any media authority on print media^[16] and no data at all is available for digital media.

It is worth noting that most information on ownership made available to the Radio Television Authority is not made available to the public. Thus, while tracking or controlling sector and/or cross-sector ownership cannot

be ensured, the public lacks critical information on who owns /controls the media.

The indicator **Plurality of media providers** remains at high risk level with a slight improvement, at 79% against 83% last year. It is greatly affected by the lack of transparency in ownership and by the limited number of providers in the print media and television. The first factor does not allow us to confirm a diversified ownership. The second one points to the fact that there are only four dailies and that the market share of the Top4 television channels was 94% and their audience stands at 54%. Both these facts mean that plurality is threatened. It is noted, however, that audience data are neither official nor audited.

The Radio Television Authority and the Competition Authority (through the Law on the Control of Concentrations Between Undertakings, L. 83(I)/2014^[17]) have powers to control concentrations and impose measures of reparation in case of violations. The main problem for an effective enforcement of the law is the absence of law provisions for the print media and the lack of any rule on digital media. At the same time, the respective laws have not been updated in a way to take into account online and digital media.

We note that claims in a book by a former aide of the President of the Republic about plans and acts that led to media control through proxy shareholders^[18] have not been investigated and, predictably, received no publicity in the media.

As already noted, the digital media sector remains an unknown field in the sense that the absence of any regulation, of any obligation for transparency and complete absence of data make it impossible to evaluate. **Plurality in digital markets** is at high risk (81%). Data on the share of online advertising market and audience by the digital intermediaries are not available at national level (more details in the digital focus, below).

Media viability faced a high risk in 2022, up to 69% against medium risk (46%) in 2021. Media were affected by the energy crisis, the impact on the economy caused by the Russian invasion in Ukraine and high inflation rates. However, verified data are only available for radio and television. Data made available on income from advertising for digital and the print media are nominative, calculated on advertising space and time. This does not take into account discounts, which in some cases are substantial, so we cannot employ this data in our evaluation. No data exist for local /regional media.

Verified data on television show that the very positive trend in revenue in the first semester of 2021 was reversed in the second semester, with the decline continuing in early 2022. The picture for radio was generally positive, with high advertising income in 2021, which continued in the first semester of 2022. However, the increase rate was at the level of inflation and growth rates, pointing more to stagnation than to a positive trend. Media do not develop any new forms for income, while they continue to put pressure on journalists' salaries and benefits. State support through a *de minimis* scheme^[19] does not seem efficient enough to warrant viability.

The risk for **Editorial independence from commercial and owner influence** has remained within the medium zone, albeit near the higher end jumping to 56%. This was influenced by new questions on the separation of editorial and commercial departments within media, but also by non-strict implementation of labour laws. Despite strong and strict labour laws regarding layoffs and dismissals or changes in employment conditions, the overall uncertainty has led to compromises with journalists not seeking to safeguard their rights through legal action.

The condition that government support to media during the Covid19 period required no layoffs is no longer in force, which made it easier for owner influence on content, and for pressures on benefits and, even, eventual layoffs.

The influence on editorial content is evident in online media, legacy and native digital. Corporate news content continues to get frequent and priority reference and exposure online, often with no distinction from editorial content.

Focus on the digital environment

As already noted, the digital media sector remains an unknown field in the sense that the absence of any regulation, of any obligation for transparency and complete absence of data makes it impossible to evaluate. **Plurality in digital markets** remains at high risk (81%). There are two large companies controlling several online media, both news providers and specialised ones, but we dispose no data neither about their market share nor their audience. Up to the previous report, access data for local platforms and media were available, verified by an independent agency. However, data are no longer provided (suspended in February 2022), because, following implementation of a “consent” clause before accessing a website, it seems to “falsify” the counting, by omitting “no consent” clicks from the overall count.

With respect of electronic media and advertising sectors, their high fragmentation seems a factor that is protecting against high concentration. However, the absence of transparency and verified data coupled with the non-update of the relevant laws taking into account the development of the digital domain cannot preclude eventual high concentrations taking place.

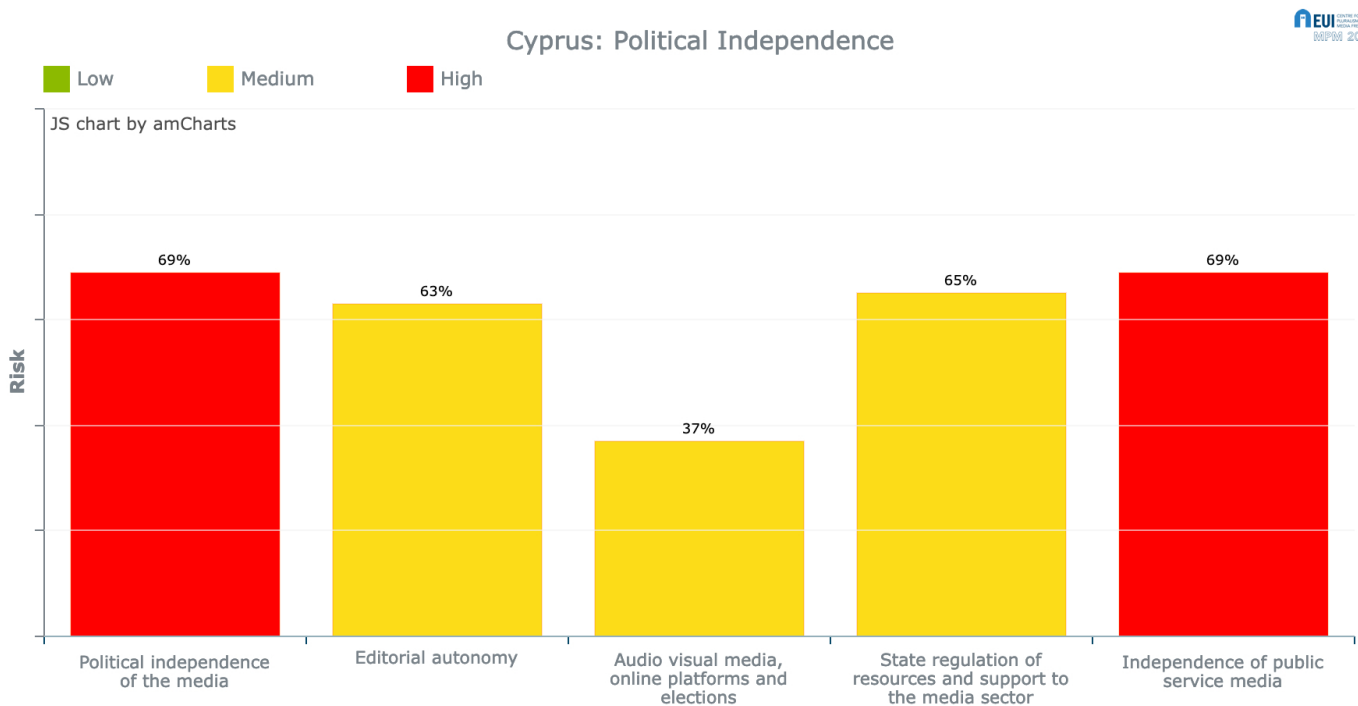
Media viability

A survey on advertising spending of companies showed an increase of investment in digital media from 2020 to 2021^[20]. The share of digital media appeared at 33% with only 7% going to Cyprus online media. We do not dispose exact figures and the size of the increase, and no data for 2022. Given the absence of accurate reliable data for 2021 and no data for 2022, in a climate of an energy crisis affecting the economy, our evaluation on existing viability trends remains inconclusive.

3.3. Political Independence (61% - medium risk)

The *Political Independence* indicators assess the existence and effectiveness of regulatory and self-regulatory safeguards against political bias and political influences over news production, distribution and access. More specifically, the area seeks to evaluate the influence of the State and, more generally, of political power over the functioning of the media market and the independence of the public service media. Furthermore, the area is concerned with the existence and effectiveness of (self)regulation in ensuring editorial independence and the availability of plural political information and viewpoints, in particular during electoral periods.

The area of **Political Independence** shows further deterioration of the risk level from 57% up to 61%. While it remains in the medium risk range, this is now closer to high risk. The indicator that pushed upwards the risk level is **State regulation of resources and support to the media sector**; the risk increase was caused by the refusal of competent State authorities to provide information on the subject. Three indicators, **Political independence of the media**, **Editorial autonomy** and **Audiovisual media, online platforms and elections** remained at exactly the same risk level as in 2021, while **Independence of public service media** showed some improvement, albeit still within the high risk bracket.



The rating of the indicator **Political independence of media** has again remained unchanged at high risk at 69%. The level of risk is defined by the lack of any clause in the Press Law 145/1989^[21] regarding print media ownership or other forms of control, the absence of any regulatory framework on digital media and gaps in the AVMS law and the incompatibilities law regarding political control of media. Strict clauses in articles 19 and 20 of the Law on Radio and Television Organisations, L. 7(I)/1998^[22] aim at ensuring pluralism in audiovisual media against ownership concentration or control. Ownership **thresholds** and other **constraints** cover all persons, including politicians, and exclude political parties from control of AVMS providers. However, in the aforementioned law there is no explicit exclusion of politicians from ownership /shareholding and /or control of radio and television. No mention either to politicians in office. The latter is addressed in the Law on Incompatibilities for persons occupying public offices (Law No. 7(I)/ 2008, art. 3.1(e))^[23]. Constraints on control of media companies by politicians in this law concern only officeholders,

occupying State positions or offices in Public Law legal entities, called semi-governmental organisations. The relevant provision does not cover all possible forms of control over media, such ownership or shareholding. In addition, there are doubts about control and enforcement mechanisms. Clauses in the law are not clear enough to warrant efficient control.

The Cyprus News Agency is the only news agency, a public law legal entity^[24], with its board of governors appointed by the Council of Ministers. A monopoly that feeds all media, in particular the online ones, with a steady flow of information and reports.

It is noteworthy that as from March 2023, and the change of government, the new Interior Minister, who is also the competent authority for the PSM and the entire media sector, is also part-owner of the company IMH^[25], which is the owner of media outlets. We have no update information on the subject following his appointment.

The indicator **Editorial autonomy** remains in the upper end of medium risk (63%). Although guaranteed by both regulatory and self-regulatory provisions^[26], editorial autonomy is not shielded by specific provisions, mechanisms and procedures that could effectively protect journalists from political interference. Appointment or dismissal of editors in chief is not governed by any regulatory framework and those occupying this post are in essence expected to pursue the political agenda of the media owner, sometimes without any visible interference. Media owners' agendas are most of the time a mixture of corporate and political goals, eased by the incumbent government's attempt to manipulate the media through developing a quid pro quo relationship with them. Most often editorial staff practice varying degrees of self-censorship, while the existence of the Cyprus Problem, called "the national problem", creates in some cases a widespread sense of 'duty' for media owners and journalists to defend the government and promote its narrative.

The risk level for the indicator **Audio visual media, online platforms and elections** has remained fairly stable at 37%, in the medium zone. In the run for the February 2023 presidential elections, all candidates and political parties had access to both the PSM and commercial radio and television. There have been complaints by many (of the 14) candidates that they were not offered access and coverage equal to that of those candidates showed by opinion polls as leading the intentions of vote. Although justified, these complaints can hardly prove discriminatory treatment or exclusion. Both PSM and commercial radio and television covered daily political communication and electoral campaigns. Equal opportunities apply to political advertising, which has to be clearly identified as such. Coverage by the PSM (RIK), which is bound to ensure access and impartiality is regulated by an obsolete regulatory framework, dating from 1986^{[27][28]}, not applicable without violating editorial independence. None has ever made any effort so far to update and modernise it.

The legislation for private radio and television is more up to date, requiring fair access and impartiality^[29]. We note that no schedules of coverage or reports are published.

Political communication and advertising via online platforms is not regulated and not addressed in any way in the law. Campaign funding regulation has loopholes and poses serious problems to accounts auditing, according to the Auditor General^[30].

As in the 2021 parliamentary election, in the period leading to the February 2023 presidential election, we noted a pervasive coverage of the President of the Republic and government ministers combined with an

unprecedented advertising effort, upsetting the fairness and equality of the election campaign.

State regulation of resources and support to the media sector is an indicator of critical value for media pluralism. Its risk level has increased considerably from 33% to 65% at the edge of the high risk range. The main cause is the absolute lack of transparency caused by the refusal of the Press and Information Office and of the Interior Ministry to provide data and information on the allocation of State resources to the media. The Team received no updated information, nothing about grants to media, or how advertising expenses have been distributed to media and whether any criteria for allocating resources had been applied.

The Press and Information Office had consistently provided the Team with all data and information requested since 2017, but in 2022, despite the promulgation of the FOI legislation since December 2020, the new Director decided to change the Office's policy, with the Interior Ministry endorsing this.

Frequencies spectrum remains the State resource fairly allocated to the media, in compliance with the Law on Radio and Television Organisations, L. 7(I)/1998^[31].

Some improvement is noted in **Independence of public service media** where the risk remains high at 69%, down from 83%. This is due to changes in the methodology and the approval of the PSM's budget without strong interference by political parties.

The generic criteria regulating the appointment of the PSM's Director-General and its governing board are often exploited with the government and political parties sharing the spoils and with independent expertise hardly present on the board. On top of this, the State and the political party system have a decisive role on the PSM's budgeting, which allows for their strong influence and, often blatant, interference in its operations.

Editorial line is at medium risk, with the governing board having openly interfered in some programming choices which were exposed in the media and dented the integrity of the PSM^[32].

Focus on the digital environment

The rating of the indicator **Political independence of media** has again remained unchanged at high risk at 69%. The level of risk is defined by the lack of any clause in the Press Law 145/1989 regarding print media ownership or other forms of control, the absence of any regulatory framework on digital media.

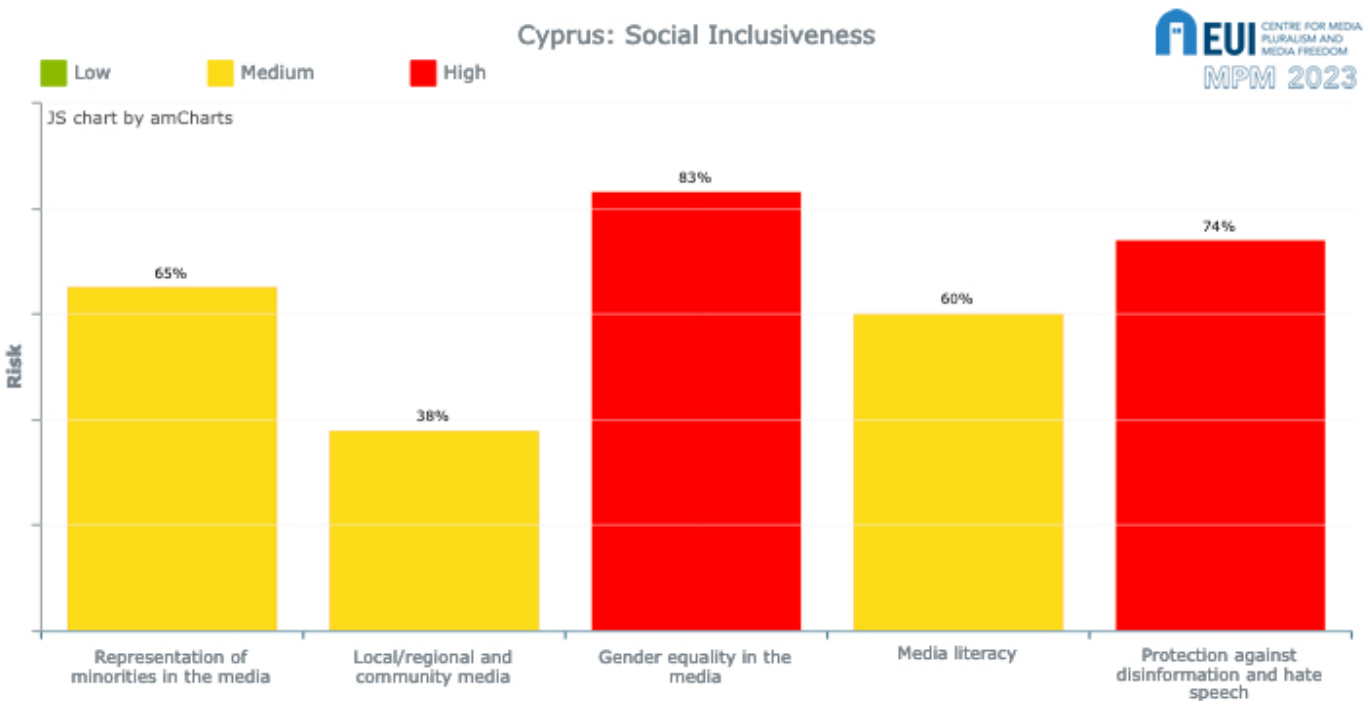
The Cyprus News Agency is the only news agency, a public law legal entity with its board of governors appointed by the Council of Ministers. A monopoly that feeds all media, in particular the online ones, with a steady flow of information and reports.

Political communication and advertising via online platforms is not regulated and not addressed in any way in the law. Campaign funding regulation has loopholes and poses serious problems to accounts auditing, according to the Auditor General.

3.4. Social Inclusiveness (64% - medium risk)

The Social Inclusiveness area focuses on the access to media by specific groups in society: minorities, local and regional communities, women and people with disabilities. It also examines the country's media literacy environment, including the digital skills of the overall population. Finally, it also includes new challenges arising from the uses of digital technologies, which are linked to the Protection against disinformation and hate speech.

Social Inclusiveness is the only area that has shown a slight improvement overall. The change is marginal but enough to contribute to the fall from high risk to the medium risk bracket (69% to 64%). The risk for the indicators **Gender equality in the media** and **Protection against disinformation and hate speech** has increased and is in the high range, while the other three, **Representation of minorities in the media**, **Local /regional and community media** and **Media Literacy** have shown improvement and are in the medium risk range.



The improvement for **Representation of minorities in the media** brought the risk from the high range at 86% down to medium at 65. The main reason is the acceptance of 'access' in its broad meaning, not in the sense of 'offered access'. No change has been observed in practice. Politicians and representatives of strong pressure groups dominate media access, while most groups are absent. Citizens of minorities recognised by law, of a total population of 5-6,000, have access on radio channels of the PSM, but not on private media^[33]. In compliance with the Law on Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation, Ch. 300A, Art. 19.1^[34] access is interpreted as productions for them, not them being given a voice.

Non-recognised minorities are composed of multiple and diverse groups of migrants -other EU and third-country citizens, usually characterized by their precarious status. While one may recognise the existence of difficulties to respond to the needs of these groups, the failure to even think about possible solutions justify the high risk of the indicator. Most of the time, members of these groups and the groups themselves are the targets of negative rhetoric sometimes even by State officials and are generally negatively portrayed in the media and among the native population.

The issue of access to media for people with disabilities remains without proper response from the AVMS providers for many years. Despite the emphasis on the need to offer such services given through the transposition of the AVMS 2018/1808 Directive into national law in December 2021, no significant improvement on the matter is detected. However, short news bulletins in sign language exist on both the PSM and private channels and some programs are either translated with voice-over or subtitled.

The indicator on **Access to local/regional and community media** remains at a medium risk. However, the risk level has decreased by 20 percentage points, from 58% to 38%, despite the persistence of major issues such as the non-recognition by law of community media and the absence of any State support to local /regional media.

This improvement is linked to the decrease of the risk level associated to the sub-indicator on community media, from high risk to medium risk. While community media are not legally recognised, they exist de facto and are licensed, where this is required (radio). There are channels run by Universities and online (no licence needed) and print media run by local authorities and others. As such, de facto community media operate free of any interference.

There are some regional/local media outlets in Cyprus. However, the sector is not developed as a result of the small size of the country. Locally implanted television organisations broadcast nation-wide and offer also programs of local interest. Support schemes during the Covid-19 have been terminated, but authorities have not provided the authors of this report with any data or information regarding allocation of advertising or assistance to local and other media. Such a lack of data has increase the risk level, compensated by the change in the evaluation of community media.

The risk level for the indicator **Gender equality in the media** has fallen back to the high risk range, climbing from 72% in 2021 to 83% this year. General and binding laws for the promotion of gender equality and respect for women's rights address, among others, issues of employment, education and training and remuneration. They act as a mitigating factor to the fact that neither the PSM nor commercial AVMS providers have even thought of an in-house gender equality policy. Media providers have not so far taken any steps or even considered programming that aims at establishing a gender balance and to fight stereotypes.

We have witnessed in 2022 a decline in the presence of women in media management boards and in executive positions, although this was already very low. There is only one woman in the 9-member governing council of the PSM.

With regard to access to media programmes by women as experts in news and current affairs broadcasting, despite improvements recorded in the latest survey by the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) "Who Makes the News" (2020 monitoring)^[35], the balance is still far from equality.

The risk level for **Media literacy** has improved from 67% down to 60%, still in the medium range, mainly due to the increase of persons that have acquired basic or above basic digital skills. At 50%, Cyprus is still lagging behind most EU member States. An important reason is the absence of any official media literacy policy, although a draft policy plan exists since 2012. Despite this absence, the Pedagogical Institute of the Ministry of Education, which is a teacher's training institution, undertakes extensive initiatives in the field of

media literacy. Among its activities is training related to online safety and the development of media skills. They have been enriched with initiatives to develop digital competences and skills against mis- and disinformation. Their inclusion in the curriculum is a promising step. These reinforce the work of the Cyprus Radio Television Authority, which is entrusted by the Law on Radio and Television Organisations, L.7(I)/1998^[36] as the agent responsible for media education. The limited scope and depth of the work in the education system and the fact that persons in non-formal education and the general public are not covered point to the need for a policy framework and a strategic plan, and making available resources to implement it.

The risk level in **Protection against disinformation and hate speech** has bounced back to within the high range at 74% against 60% in 2021. The change is linked to the introduction in recent years of laws aiming to fight sexism and bullying, and violence against women^[37]. The team notes also indications of a rise in the awareness level of judges, who identify in some offenses the element of hatred and racism^[38]. Despite that, no comprehensive policy or obvious intent to substantively tackle hate speech do exist and it is hard to detect any improvement in the general environment. Online, the problem is serious and recommendations in an opinion of the Ombudsman (July 2021) that media establish monitoring mechanisms and remove hate speech comments from their online editions has not been adopted.

Regarding disinformation, despite circumstantial statements by officials, authorities have not made any step for promoting a policy framework. There are disperse initiatives by NGOs for raising awareness, but no organisation or media is seriously engaged in fact-checking. The issue is of even greater concern given that both politicians and media do not hesitate to spread misinformation, and Eurostat 2021 findings point to an increased ratio of Cypriots who do not check the veracity of the information they consume. It is worth noting that in late March 2023, the House Legal Affairs Committee began discussions on a Fake News draft law. The discussion was inconclusive and the draft was sent back to the Justice Minister for further examination.

Focus on the digital environment

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4. Conclusions

In general terms Freedom of expression in Cyprus is respected. Media pluralism, however faces critical challenges and risks increased further in 2022. In both the legacy and the digital environment no adequate action has been taken for updating the regulatory framework and introducing new rules, while challenges are growing. Ownership transparency is not a requirement in ways to ensure avoidance of media concentrations, which combined with the absence of audited data tends to render the landscape opaque to regulators and the public.

While media play a fair role in election processes, political bias, and political interference in the media compromise this role with deeper 'invisible' influences. They appear increasingly subjected to influences by commercial interests, while they are prone to reflect the owners' corporate and political agendas. Media literacy activities may mitigate the dangers from influences in today's mediated environment, but especially without a policy plan this is not an efficient protecting shield from bias and disinformation.

The need to update regulatory frameworks taking into account the online environment and other changes is an urgent priority in order to protect media pluralism.

Fundamental Protection:

- Authorities must address media issues and ensure pluralism is a priority, and urgently update and enhance the entire regulatory framework. As some online publishers noted to us, a regulated and transparent media environment sets the prerequisites for trust by the public.
- Given the failure of authorities to effectively implement the laws on FOI and on whistleblowers, Civil Society and NGOs should take initiatives for raising awareness, monitoring enforcement and exert pressure for law compliance by all departments.
- Unionised and non-unionised journalists and all media stakeholders need to reaffirm their role and reclaim their status to regain the public's trust. Promoting quality and excellence in journalism is a major requirement to the above.

Market Plurality:

- The media need to clear content from external influences and redeem their social role to reverse the decreasing level of public trust.
- In addition to claiming an institutionalised State assistance, media should seek new ways of making income that would effectively warrant their viability.

Political Independence:

- Media and journalists should develop mechanisms of defence and resist control and bias from Government and politicians.

- Authorities and political parties should revise their approach to media, they should respect media freedom. Through new legislation and respect of the rules they should warrant the unhindered operation of an independent PSM as a forum for free expression for all.
- Media professionals should seek ways to balance defence of their labour rights and claiming their editorial independence without harming the latter. Proving their independence may strengthen support for labour rights.

Social Inclusiveness:

- Authorities should set and ensure implementation of an obligation of media organisations to broaden access and give voice to more groups. Setting an obligation to adopt gender equality comprehensive policies is also imperative.
- The law must address the broader area of Community media, with the authorities providing the resources needed for their operation in the service of the community.
- With time passing, the adoption by the authorities of a media literacy policy becomes more urgent given the emerging new challenges. It was the multiplication of media and platforms, then spreading disinformation became a threat to Democracy and, now, artificial intelligence is the emerging bigger challenge. Enabling citizens to respond to challenges is critical for Democracy.

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ANNEXE I. COUNTRY TEAM

First name	Last name	Position	Institution	MPM2023 CT Leader
<i>Christophoros</i>	<i>Christophorou</i>		<i>Independent expert</i>	X
<i>Nicholas</i>	<i>Karides</i>	<i>Member of the Governing body</i>	<i>Institute for Mass Media, IMME</i>	

ANNEXE II. GROUP OF EXPERTS

The Group of Experts is composed of specialists with a substantial knowledge and experience in the field of media. The role of the Group of Experts was to review especially sensitive/subjective evaluations drafted by the Country Team in order to maximize the objectivity of the replies given, ensuring the accuracy of the final results.

First name	Last name	Position	Institution
<i>Costas</i>	<i>Stratilatis</i>	<i>Associate Professor</i>	<i>University of Nicosia (UNIC)</i>
<i>Giorgos</i>	<i>Frangos</i>	<i>Chairman</i>	<i>Union of Cyprus Journalists</i>
<i>Antigoni</i>	<i>Themistocleous</i>	<i>Regulator - Officer</i>	<i>Cyprus Radio Television Authority</i>
<i>Xenia</i>	<i>Xenofontos</i>	<i>Director Corporate Affairs & CSR at Digital Tree</i>	<i>Digital Tree</i>
<i>Eleni</i>	<i>Mavrou</i>	<i>Board of Directors</i>	<i>Dialogos Media Organisation</i>
<i>Marios</i>	<i>Drousiotis</i>	<i>Chairman</i>	<i>Cyprus Consumers Association</i>
<i>Sofocles</i>	<i>Markides</i>	<i>Member of the Board of Governors</i>	<i>RIK/CYBC. Public Service Media</i>

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