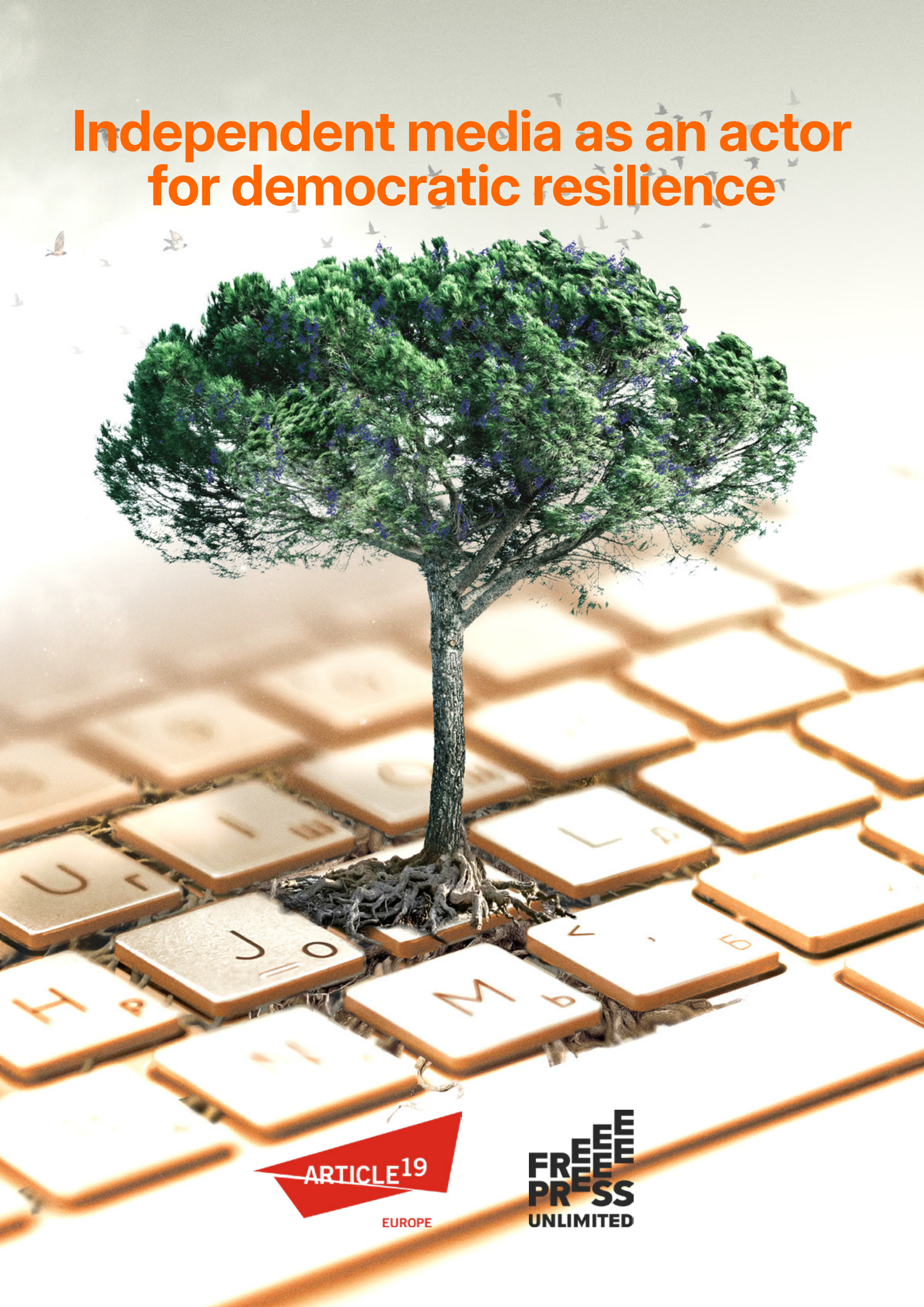
Independent media as an actor for democratic resilience



ARTICLE 19
EUROPE

FREE PRESS UNLIMITED

This position paper shows that independent media play an indispensable role in democratic resilience. It makes recommendations on how they should be included in the whole-of-society response of the European Centre for Democratic Resilience (ECDR), including as a partner in the Stakeholder Platform. Independent media are a powerful actor in the response to threats to democracies from an early warning stage to structural prevention, while not including them in such efforts poses serious risks.

The role of media within the whole-of-society approach to democratic resilience

Independent journalism is a key autonomous democratic institution that **underpins all other democratic institutions**. The democratic benefits from independent media go far beyond its own users; investing in media is one of the most cost-effective ways to strengthen democracies. Conversely, this is why the media is often one of the first democratic institutions to be attacked. Weakening independent journalism paves the way for breaking down other democratic pillars such as open and free elections and the impartial judiciary, as it reduces the political consequences of such democratic erosion.

While disinformation campaigns are often initiated and amplified by foreign actors that seek to undermine democracies, these are successful mainly when enabled and amplified by domestic political and other actors. By providing citizens with reliable and plural information, independent media reduce the reinforcing impact that FIMI and disinformation campaigns can have on the emergence of autocracy, domestic democratic erosion and the prolonging of autocratic rule. They can detect FIMI and domestic democratic erosion **at** an early stage **or enable democracies to** 'bounce back' after autocratic restrictions have been implemented.

ARTICLE 19 EUROPE

FREE PRESS UNLIMITED

Early warning

Free, independent media act as a watchdog and offer public interest information based on facts. In doing so, investigative journalists can play a powerful role in uncovering and exposing FIMI and disinformation campaigns. They function as an early warning system, signaling threats that can inform citizens and governments to take restoring measures. Notably, their reporting **not only detects and exposes the false narratives, but also the** underlying power structures, tactics and financial flows that sustain FIMI campaigns.

Such reporting equips other Member States to anticipate disinformation, as these patterns often transcend or are replicated **across EU Member States' borders**. By reporting on government sponsored disinformation and legislation that could potentially weaken democratic pillars, autocratic tendencies can be addressed at an early stage and prevented from expanding. In this way, this early warning capacity is also essential for effectively **addressing domestic democratic erosion.**

The strength and added value of the early warning function of the media flows precisely from their independence and public interest reporting and here, it is important to note that investigative journalists conducting this work face **enhanced levels of intimidation, threats and attacks**, including becoming the subject of disinformation campaigns themselves. Faced with rising authoritarianism and conflict, journalists are increasingly forced to seek a safe harbour in Europe. Journalists in exile are a critical bulwark against disinformation. Yet, also when relocated to the EU, they continue to face transnational repression as well as financial challenges to continue their work as a journalist.

ARTICLE 19 EUROPE

FREE PRESS UNLIMITED

Contextualisation and nuance

Journalism is not just about reporting facts or disseminating information. Free, independent media provide analysis, clarification and contextualisation of information and tailor their reporting to the audiences that they serve. While FIMI and disinformation campaigns become increasingly tailored to local vulnerabilities and typically aim to fuel polarisation, independent media - particularly local media - provide contextualised and tailored dissemination of information that brings nuance and a plurality of perspectives.

This has proven to be essential during elections, when independent media are able to seek and share the veracity of political claims, enabling citizens to make a free and informed choice. In polarised societies, even for pro-democratically minded citizens preventing 'the other' camp from winning can be decisive to vote for autocratic leaders.

Trust

Free independent media have built **durable audience relationships** over the course of many years, sustained and consolidated by their original reporting, the constant editorial verification of sources and the credibility and trust accumulated through continued audience engagement. As a result, independent media outlets are an anchor point that citizens turn to in times of crisis, uncertainty, or information insecurity. During armed conflict, access to independent information provided by independent media can even become a literal lifeline: guiding citizens to food distribution points, shelter or lost relatives. While reach is getting cheaper through technological innovation and artificial intelligence, this qualitative trust relationship cannot be established overnight and should not be underestimated.

ARTICLE 19 EUROPE

FREE PRESS UNLIMITED

Prevention and structural resilience

Uncovering disinformation and FIMI campaigns is also a form of awareness raising that contributes to **inoculating the public against future attempts** to manipulate public opinion. Countries with high media trust levels and strong public service media are most resilient to disinformation, while audiences that consume more legacy news are less receptive to it.

Notably, journalists can strengthen efforts to address disinformation and FIMI before it has spread. They provide **the qualitative reach and contextual tailoring that is needed for effective prebunking**. Independent media's access to audiences that they have a durable relationship with, is a prerequisite for factual information to spread and land effectively.

At the same time, it could pose a **security risk not to include independent media** in the response to threats to democratic resilience. It would seriously compromise the effectiveness of such responses under the ECDR, as it would be deprived of independent evidence, investigative findings, local knowledge and scrutiny of the authorities' own responses. Independent media could also unconsciously amplify and further spread harmful FIMI and disinformation narratives to broad audiences, which would undermine their trustworthiness and eventually public trust in the media in general.

ARTICLE 19 EUROPE

FREE PRESS UNLIMITED

Recommendations for EU policymakers involved in the ECDR

Enable independent media to contribute and have access to the information exchange and analysis developed in the ECDR. The ECDR should provide secure, confidential and voluntary channels for information sharing with the goal to build broader, cross-border and cross-sector situational awareness and analysis on (patterns of) threats to democratic resilience and structural vulnerabilities. The reporting of independent media, in particular local and investigative journalists, can feed the ECDR with journalistic findings on broader (cross-border) tactics, financial flows and power dynamics, while information sharing and analysis can equip independent media to be a positive force for early warning, prevention and structural democratic resilience. Such exchange should be anchored in explicit safeguards for source protection, editorial independence and publication decisions.

Meaningfully include independent media in the Stakeholder Platform. An effective response to threats to democratic resilience requires a structural exchange between governments and media to coordinate where appropriate, while safeguarding their separate roles and journalistic independence at all times. The Stakeholder Platform should therefore be a structured permanent participation mechanism that facilitates regular and meaningful exchange between media and EU institutions and Member States, with the aim to ensure that policy responses to protect democratic resilience are informed by and adaptive to the evolving needs and realities of journalists. Involving media at the EU-level ensures the ECDR is not receptive to varying levels of media freedom and independence within EU Member States. The selection of media should aim for geographical balance (not only Brussels-based) and diversity in the type and scope of media outlets.

ARTICLE 19 EUROPE

FREE PRESS UNLIMITED

Recommendations for EU policymakers involved in the ECDR

Meaningfully involve local media in the work of the ECDR through the national centres. To ensure that the ECDR benefits from the particular value of local journalism for for effective responses to threats to democratic resilience, national centres should involve independent local journalists in a similar fashion to what is envisaged at European level. The ECDR should coordinate the involvement of local media in national centres, ensure the information flow between the EU and national levels, and stimulate their cooperation and exchange of best practices across Europe.

Make the protection of plural, independent information, media freedom and journalists, including in exile, a core focus area of the ECDR. Media freedom and the protection of journalists should be considered as an investment for democratic resilience. The work of the ECDR should align with and promote the implementation of relevant legislative frameworks such as the European Media Freedom Act and the Digital Services Act. In line with the 2025 EU Strategy for Civil Society, the ECDR should protect free independent media outlets and strengthen the safety of journalists through legal, digital and physical protection. In particular, it should identify the specific protection needs of local, investigative and exiled journalists that are at the frontlines of democratic resilience, including against transnational repression.

Ensure project proposals within the ECDR assess implications for the independent media ecosystem. The ECDR should make it a requirement for EU Member States' project proposals to assess the implications for the independent media ecosystem and to consult/include independent media where relevant.

Dedicate adequate funding to the protection of media freedom and journalists under the upcoming Multi-Annual Financial Framework as a strategic investment in democratic resilience in line with the goals of the ECDR.

ARTICLE 19 EUROPE

FREE PRESS UNLIMITED


MEDIA FREEDOM
RAPID RESPONSE