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The "Authoritarian Utopia"

The impact of funding cuts on independent media

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Background

In January 2025, a US executive order suspended foreign assistance, leading to an unprecedented reduction in support for independent media in many places where it is urgently needed. Shortly after, Internews Europe led a rapid assessment in close collaboration with three consortia of media development organisations brought together under the European Commission's new Thematic Financial Framework Partnership Agreement (FFPA) for Human Rights and Democracy. The findings were presented in the report "Crisis in Journalism: the impact of US Government Funding Cuts on Global Media"¹. During the spring of 2026, Free Press Unlimited led a follow-up assessment of the impact of the funding cuts by Western governments from January 2025 onward.

Inputs were collected from the three FFPA consortia and their networks: the BRAVE consortium led by BBC Media Action and including WAN-IFRA (the World Association of News Publishers), Fondation Hirondelle Media for Peace and Human Dignity, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), Equal Rights and Independent Media (ERIM), SembraMedia, Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) Zimbabwe, the Foundation ARIJ International (Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism), and the Samir Kassir Foundation; the consortium Invested in the Future led by Free Press Unlimited and including Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF), Deutsche Welle Akademie (DWA), and International Media Support (IMS); and the AGILE consortium led by Internews Europe and including ARTICLE 19, Fojo Media Institute, Thomson Media, and Canal France International (CFI). Together, these networks span the globe and bring unprecedented insight into the needs of local, independent media.

1 Crisis in Journalism: The Impact of the US Government Funding Cuts on Global Media, Rafiq Copeland, Internews Europe on behalf of FFPA partners.

Executive summary

Independent media were already facing an existential crisis before Trump's inauguration, largely driven by declining revenues caused by technological change as well as democratic decline coupled with repression. The 2025 U.S. funding cuts deepened this crisis even further, hitting outlets that in many contexts represented some of the last remaining sources of independent reporting - produced without fear or favour. Independent media continue to suffer not only from the U.S. withdrawal but other Western governments traditionally inclined to invest in independent media have also retreated by decreasing available budgets. The OECD reported a huge decrease of 23.1 percent in ODA spending by DAC members in 2025 compared to 2024, including the UK government's decision to cut development aid to 0.3 percent from 0.5 percent of the overall state budget,² the French government reduced development aid by an unprecedented 37 percent in 2025 and the Dutch government by 35 percent in 2027. Additionally, Deutsche Welle Akademie's State of the Media Development Report finds that only 11 percent of media development organizations have sufficient funding to meaningfully serve the public.³ It should not come as a surprise that as a result many independent media outlets across the globe have reported downsizing, closure, and less ability to report or investigate. Several media partners surveyed for this report anticipate that without intervention many more closures of independent media are ahead.

Although some political and geopolitical consequences of this existential crisis for the media are already visible, long term consequences are still unfolding. This report's data on the more long term consequences gives insight on what may be expected from the future if precise measures aren't taken. One year ago, in the FFPA-led report "Crisis in Journalism", presented 6 months after the funding cut by the Trump administration commenced, we had already raised serious concerns about the political and geopolitical consequences of these cuts. Logically, the funding void might be filled by parties offering less protections and manipulating information for their own gain, be it power, financial profit, or both. Thereby, funding cuts could impact not just the ability to hold political elites to account in countries where media is based, but could result in noticeable geopolitical changes - also for Europe.

Recent reports by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2026)⁴ and Article 19 (2026)⁵ on the impact of U.S. funding cuts, laid bare some of the most direct consequences of the U.S. funding cuts. They reported that the median grantee of their survey respondents lost about 35 to 40 percent of annual revenue for the year 2025. That number makes sense in light of the fact that the U.S. government cut at least \$1.7 billion worth of freedom of expression programmes.⁶ This number was reported when some of the terminations were still unfolding. This is largely in line with our own findings, more than a year after the cuts. Out of the 57 surveyed partners, 37 percent reported budget cuts of 26-50 percent and 26 percent reported budget cuts of more than 50 percent. Unfortunately, the abrupt and devastating level of the cuts have also led to media outlets and media support organisations ceasing operations. For this research we have not collected data on this but we are aware of several examples such as the closing of our Ukrainian partner, media outlet Zaborona, caused by the cessation of support of both the US and UK governments. Zaborona was an independent media outlet specialized in long-form, analytical reporting.

2 <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/uk-to-reduce-aid-to-0-3-of-gross-national-income- from-2027/>

3 Deutsche Welle Akademie (2026), The State of Media Development Report 2026.

4 Sabet, D., & Abbott, S. (2026). The Impact of Ending US International Media Assistance. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. See: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2026/04/united-states-international-media-assistance-ending-usaid-independent-journalism>.

5 Article 19 (2026). Targeted; How Cuts to US Foreign Aid Threaten Freedom of Expression and its Defenders Worldwide. See: https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/ARTICLE-19_Targeted_FINAL_April-2026.pdf.

6 Article 19 (2026). Targeted; How Cuts to US Foreign Aid Threaten Freedom of Expression and its Defenders Worldwide. See: https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/ARTICLE-19_Targeted_FINAL_April-2026.pdf.

The long-term political and geopolitical consequences of the U.S. government funding cuts are still unfolding, but some of the medium-term effects are already visible. In the Philippines for example, disinformation has been able to flow more uncontrolled and narratives that support Chinese claims to the South China Sea have been diffusing more rapidly.⁷ Partners in Venezuela reported on how RT Academy⁸ provides training in several African countries, Argentina, Mexico and Cuba as an indirect way to approach people who can help amplify pro-Russian narratives in each of those countries, make friends and improve RT's credibility.⁹

This report lays bare similar worrying but expected developments. Our survey shows unequivocally that where independent media decline, authoritarian interests fill the vacuum. Partners have reported on this dynamic across different continents. The boundary between domestic politics and international relations shows to be thin as well in this regard. In Pakistan for example, our partners report that China's ability and assertiveness in trying to export its governance model have increased. Pakistani media organizations have been open about their recent collaboration with the Chinese embassy and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Authoritarian governments, such as Pakistan's military elite, are unlikely to push back against these dynamics.

The consequences of the US funding cuts should concern not solely recipient countries or the United States, but also the European Union. There is little reason to believe that current developments have little or just modest effects on EU soft power. More than for the U.S., which also exerts military power, normative power is the hallmark of EU international influence. The idea behind enthusiastic funding of independent media and other democratic institutions is that this compatibility does not only create more free and peaceful countries, but also incentivizes these countries to join Euro-Atlantic alliances and structures.¹⁰ As the diminishing of independent media is expected to drive the normative decline of democratic principles more in general, this soft power is also expected to decline.

What is needed now is a fundamental shift in how European policymakers understand support for independent media. This is not simply a matter of solidarity, nor only a normative commitment to freedom of expression. It is a strategic investment in Europe's own security, stability and influence.

The same political actors who increasingly argue that international cooperation must be more interest-driven should recognise that independent media serve precisely those interests. Where independent journalism collapses, corruption becomes harder to expose, authoritarian influence becomes easier to project, disinformation spreads with fewer constraints, and democratic allies become weaker. The vacuum is not neutral: it is filled by actors whose interests often run directly counter to those of the European Union.

For Europe, the question is therefore not whether it can afford to support independent media globally. The question is whether it can afford not to. If the EU wants to remain a credible geopolitical actor, preserve its normative influence, strengthen democratic partners, and counter authoritarian interference, then support for independent media must be treated as strategic infrastructure: as essential to democratic resilience as election support, rule-of-law programming, anti-corruption work or cyber defence.

7 Sabet, D., & Abbott, S. (2026). The Impact of Ending US International Media Assistance. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. See: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2026/04/united-states-international-media-assistance-ending-usaid-independent-journalism>.

8 RT Academy is an international educational project of the RT School, w.

9 Interviews with multiple anonymous Latina American partners.

10 Demeš, P. (2011). Twenty years of Western Democracy Assistance in Central and Eastern Europe. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Stockholm. www.idea.int/resources/analysis/upload/Demes_low_2.pdf. Accessed on, 27.

Democracies make more reliable allies. Societies with independent media are harder to capture, harder to destabilise and better equipped to resist authoritarian narratives. In that sense, funding independent media is not a matter of charity. It is a long-term investment in accountable governance, diplomatic stability, economic transparency and a global information space in which democratic values can still compete. While the main message of this report is that a mindshift - in which independent media are considered essential for the strategic longevity of Europe - is currently warranted, we provide more specific recommendations.

Recommendations for future funding

Partners surveyed for this report almost unanimously presented the following more specific recommendations to policy makers and donors for what future funding should look like:

- **Sustainable, long-term funding:** funding frameworks for independent media should reflect a long-term commitment to information access and accountability by moving away from short-term, project-based grants toward sustained, multi-year support.
- **Invest in local media:** invest in local and community-based media initiatives.
- **Donor coordination:** implement stronger coordination among international donors to reduce funding gaps and avoid duplication.
- **Support cross-border collaboration and convening power:** funders should recognize collaborative and cross-border journalism as a distinct investment category warranting dedicated, flexible support.
- **Emergency and rapid-response mechanisms:** strengthen emergency funding mechanisms to help independent media organizations respond quickly to sudden disruptions, such as the adoption of discriminatory laws, political crises or funding cuts.
- **Simple and flexible funding processes:** donors must introduce simpler processes and more flexible rules and payment mechanisms.
- **Collaborate with intermediaries:** do not view the investment in local media as a substitute for collaboration with intermediaries but as complementary.

1. Introduction

This report constitutes an attempt to understand how media outlets and media support organizations are doing a year after the initial assessment. Since we are a year further, we also aimed at getting a better understanding of the indirect consequences of the cuts. Unfortunately, our findings concluded that the impact of the funding cuts on independent media is profound and potentially devastating for the sector which was already struggling to survive. This is very much in line with the reports published in April by Article 19 and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

While the U.S. government funding cuts have had the most impact, this report looks beyond U.S. government funding cuts and more broadly into the changing funding landscape, (lack of) donor priority and concurrent geopolitical shifts. We interviewed our own partners to gain insight into the challenges they are facing and the consequences they observe. Our partners are - by design - operating in an environment where independent media is needed; settings where independent media are scarce and essential such as conflict or authoritarian settings. Altogether, the experiences of our partners reveal patterns that reflect broader developments affecting the present and future of independent media in these settings. This allows us to focus on overarching trends rather than country-level experiences.

Around 80 percent of our surveyed partners have reported funding cuts and consequential reductions in activity. Twenty six percent have reported that over 50 percent of their funding has been cut. Such cuts are obviously consequential, and partners report a plethora of ways in which they have tried to stay afloat. Partners report significant lay-offs, salary cuts and a reduction in both the quality and quantity in reporting. In terms of a decline in quality, respondents emphasize that they are forced to reduce high-cost journalism such as investigative reporting, and that they have less ability to engage in audience engagement and innovations. Our partners face a level of austerity that has led respondents to report that they are skipping meals in order to keep reporting.

This year, independent media reported that the erosion of their capabilities has reached a level that is beyond easy repair. Even in case of political and financial tailwind it would take years to recover -if recovery is even possible at all. Networks, audiences, and employees (expertise) that are lost cannot simply be rebuilt. It should not come as a surprise that these developments are highly politically and geopolitically consequential. We see through our partners how informational vacuums emerge. It is worth noting that in many contexts, our partners were already among the last ones standing with regards to providing independent news. When they face severe issues, this results in news deserts, disinformation campaigns spreading completely unchecked, and the authoritarian utopia of a complete absence of journalists that can hold them to account with their reporting. Sometimes, the presence of a vacuum is the second worst outcome. Partners have also described how foreign or domestic authoritarian actors have already tried to fill the vacuum.

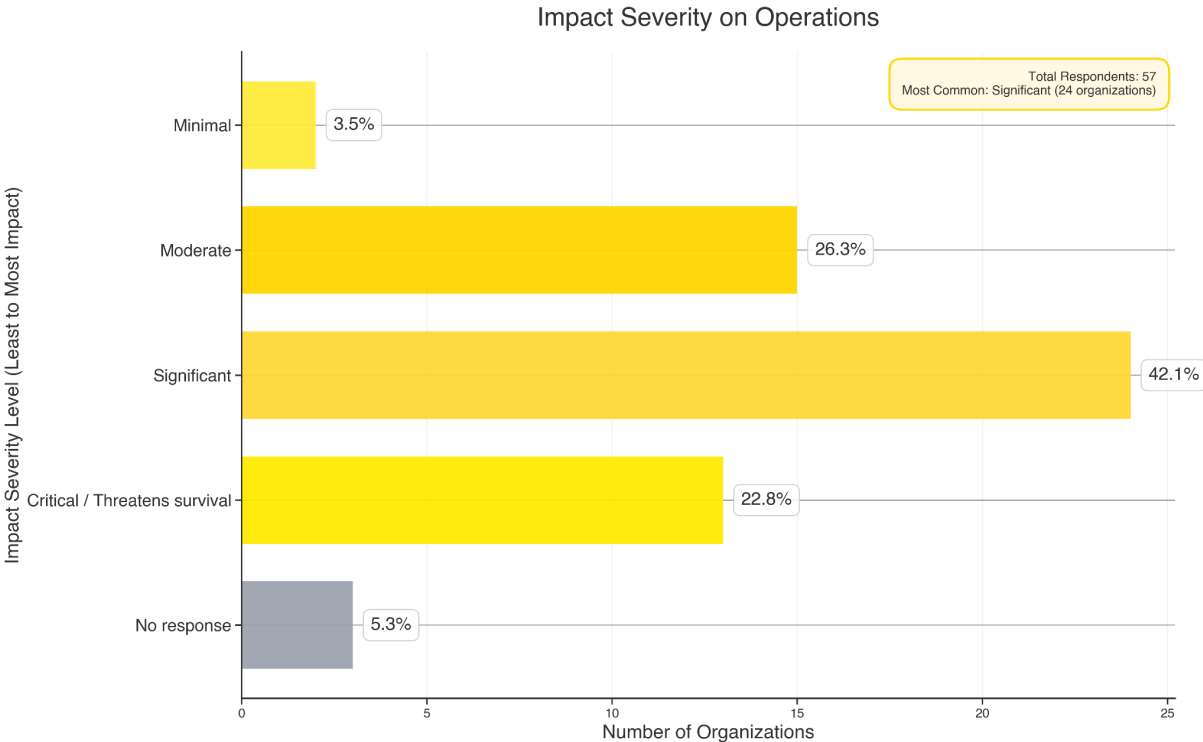
In the current context, it is key to search for an optimum with regards to funding independent media and media support organizations. It is obvious that supporting independent media and media support organizations should be a priority for anyone that is interested in upholding a world in which the public is informed and in upholding/rebuilding a world that is normatively grounded in democratic standards and principles. This means that strategic investments in independent media are needed. While it is possible to use resources more effectively - as we lay out in the recommendations section of this report - this optimization of resources won't be enough to turn the tide.

2. Direct impact of the cuts

Overall, these shifts contribute to a more fragile information ecosystem, where accountability is weakened, public trust declines, and space for independent, critical journalism becomes increasingly restricted.

Anonymous Media outlet, Syria

One and a half years after the U.S. government funding cuts, funding for independent media has significantly decreased across the board. It is not just US government funding that has decreased, but also funding from other donors traditionally supporting independent media such as Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany and France, and large institutional donors such as the Open Society Foundation. Where investments in innovation and striving for sustainability were already challenging for the majority of independent media outlets before, now many of them are forced to focus on survival instead of thriving. To get the most complete picture of how our partners have been affected by recent funding cuts, we surveyed our partners on the level of severity of the cuts on their operations and the budget that has been affected (See figure 1 and 2).

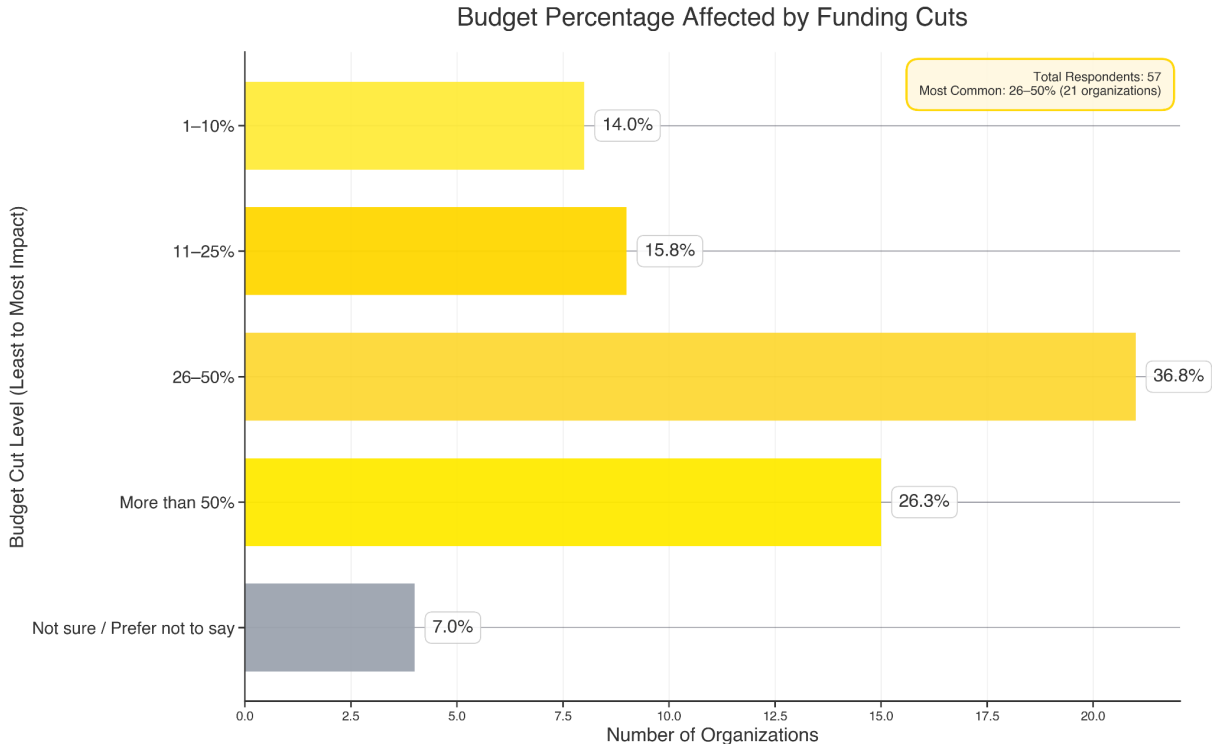


Two thirds of our respondents indicated that the impact of the budget cuts was either significant or threatened their survival. More than 1 out of 3 partners reported that between 26 and 50 percent of their budget was affected, whereas more than a quarter of partners reported that even more than 50 percent of their annual budget was cut. These findings do not paint an exceptional picture, and are also in line with what Article 19 and Carnegie have reported. However, it must be noted that we asked our respondents to report on all possible budget cuts and not just US cuts.

Disproportionate effect on community media

Partners report that community media have been disproportionately impacted by the funding cuts, in particular those media outlets that serve rural areas or vulnerable communities. Many organizations report having had to scale back on audience outreach and local engagement with communities, including specific groups such as young people, women and marginalized groups. As a result, platforms for the perspectives, voices and interests from rural areas and vulnerable groups are disappearing.

Figure 1a and 1b. For this survey, FPU sent out the survey to all of its partners. In addition, other members of the FPPA consortium sent out the survey to their partners. In total, this survey includes 57 respondents. Respondents come from Central Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Middle East and North Africa, South and Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Western Europe.¹¹



11 Afghanistan, Argentina, Bangladesh, El Salvador, Georgia, Guatemala, Jordan, Lebanon, Lithuania, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Myanmar, Namibia, Pakistan, Palestine, Poland, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Switzerland, Syria, Tunisia, Venezuela, Yemen and Zambia.

Finally, the risk of the station shutting down is increasing significantly if the current situation persists. This would result in the loss of an independent local media platform that has contributed to strengthening community dialogue, social cohesion, and public awareness especially in a rural area that lacks alternative media outlets. Such a closure would not only affect the station's staff, but the community as a whole, which would lose a vital space for expression, accountability, and participation.

Radio Station, Jordan

Recent research by BBC Media Action¹² shows the innovative strategies community media in Zambia and Zimbabwe apply to sustain their operations. Partly by making use of the fact that as local outlets they are embedded in their communities, which makes people inclined to support them in whatever way they can to keep them alive. Ranging from accepting small donations to free taxi rides for staff and trading advertising space for free internet access. Nevertheless, the research concludes that community media need donor support to ensure sustainability.

Larger media outlets, often based in larger urban areas with a substantial audience can transition to commercial models or still attract some levels of (commercial) funding. This is however often not the case for local, smaller media outlets, media operating in peripheral areas or serving rural or vulnerable communities and media operating in more repressed contexts. Especially when outlets are covering sensitive political and conflict-related topics, or when their audience is smaller, and more niche, which generates little advertising revenue overall. At the same time there is limited State interest in funding these independent media, for example because local powers are threatened by the topics they cover. There has also been increased competition over fewer funding opportunities, making it harder for smaller and more locally working organizations to sustain their work. This funding instability is creating a bifurcated media landscape where media outlets can either manage to survive and increase in revenue, or face extinction.

Challenges for sustainability, innovation and recovery

A few international organizations and private foundations have continued to provide targeted support for independent media, journalist safety, and media innovation. In some cases, these donors have helped sustain smaller programs such as fellowships, training workshops, or collaborative reporting projects. However, the scale of this support is generally smaller and more project-specific compared to earlier multi-year institutional funding. In addition, certain donors focusing on issues such as climate change, labor rights, or digital governance have supported media engagement within their thematic programs. For example, journalists may be invited to participate in training or reporting fellowships linked to climate reporting, migration, or public health. While useful, these initiatives often support short-term reporting outputs rather than long-term strengthening of media institutions.

Partners also mention that the increased competition over limited funding has placed pressure on organizations to align more closely with donor priorities, which may sometimes limit independence or shift focus away from local needs.

¹² BBC Media Action (2026), The cost of staying on air: surviving as community media in Zimbabwe and Zambia.

A media outlet in Syria elaborated on these effects:

"[T]here has been a modest increase in support from smaller, more flexible donors, including local and regional initiatives, as well as international organizations focusing on specific themes such as climate, gender, or community-based journalism. This diversification has allowed some media outlets to continue operating, albeit at a reduced scale, and has encouraged more specialized and niche content production. However, this shift has not fully compensated for the loss of larger, long-term funding streams. Many of the new funding opportunities are short-term, project-based, and highly competitive, which creates instability for media organizations and limits their ability to plan strategically or invest in long-term investigative work. [...] While this may ensure short-term survival, it risks undermining credibility and weakening the role of independent journalism."

It has become increasingly clear that we are currently witnessing a degree of erosion of independent media, that even in the case of political and financial tailwinds, it would take years to recover. Several partners mention that without intervention they expect more closures of media outlets and media support organisations ahead. Independent media with an audience that trusts the information they produce, cannot simply be rebuilt after their closure. Research shows that independent media maintain trust primarily through continued audience engagement.¹³ Because of the cuts networks and audiences are lost and employees, who are the carriers of expertise on how to produce independent reporting, who their audience is and how to reach them, will transition to more stable jobs. But more importantly, trust takes years to build, especially in contexts where governance is weak.

[...] Sawt Ajloun Radio is the only local media outlet operating in the rural areas of Ajloun Governorate, and has been the sole radio station in the region since the establishment of the Jordanian state. This gives it a critical and sensitive role in amplifying the voices of rural communities and representing their issues. Despite this vital role, the station's capacities were already limited and modest even before these challenges. With the escalation of the funding crisis, the situation has become significantly more difficult and complex. [...] the risk of the station shutting down is increasing significantly if the current situation persists.

Sawt Aljoun Radio, Jordan

One of the results of these developments has been that the majority of independent media grapples with the fact that they have funding available for specific activities and for a limited period of time. Their ability to plan ahead is severely limited. With smaller budgets, investments in innovation are severely hampered. Partners reported their inability to invest in their marketing departments and research and testing capacity, making it hard to achieve sustainability. Overall the scale and availability of support is too small and short for partners to work on lasting change.

In recent years, due to funding uncertainty, our priority has been to retain the existing team rather than expand it. As a result, we have limited capacity to further develop the media outlet, even though this is very important for our long-term sustainability.

Media outlet, Georgia

¹³ Banerjee, S., Mont'Alverne, C., Arguedas, A. R., Toff, B., Fletcher, R., & Nielsen, R. K. (2023). Strategies for building trust in news: What the public say they want across four countries. Reuters Institute.

Staff layoffs and the loss of expertise

Partners report that they struggle to maintain the same level and quality of reporting. 80 Percent of the respondents have had to cut down on staff and salaries. Independent media have had to go through massive staff layoffs resulting in a loss of qualified experts and weakening of diversity, skills and expertise in their team.

A Syrian partner commented on this:

For example, several small and mid-sized Syrian outlets that previously produced regular multimedia content have reduced their output to minimal publishing, focusing only on low-cost formats such as brief news updates. In some cases, trained journalists have left the sector entirely in search of more stable income, leading to a loss of expertise and institutional memory.

The journalistic community proved to be resilient, and with far stretching decisions some have been able to continue operating, albeit with very limited capacity, by cutting down on content and reach. Volunteers are filling the gaps here and there, which is not a sustainable solution. Journalists are pushed out of the sector due to large salary cuts and hiring freezes, and there is a growing workload and burnout for those remaining at the media outlets that had to scale-down. For example, one partner reports that they had to cut down staff from 8 full-time employees to 1,5. One of our partners reflected on the way in which voluntary efforts are currently keeping independent information afloat:

“While our commitment remains unshaken, such voluntary efforts undoubtedly require external support to remain sustainable and continue serving the community effectively. Without it, there is a long-term risk that the depth of public oversight and community debate could be stretched thin.”

Radio Station, Yemen

Pluralism diminished

Reduced donor support has limited media operations, including fewer field reports, reduced investigative journalism, and less coverage of local issues—weakening public access to information and accountability.

Radio Station, South Sudan

Funding cuts have had serious consequences for the quantity and quality, depth and diversity of content production. Partners report a noticeable decline in content production overall, and in particular on types of journalism that are more resource and time-intensive, such as investigative journalism, monitoring governance at local level, and thematic coverage on environmental justice, politics and minorities, and LGBTQ+ and gender issues. These are all areas that typically require more field reporting, travel and research and a longer-term investment. As a result of the funding cuts, newsrooms have had to reduce their engagement in these areas.

This gap has had a negative impact on the local community, particularly on vulnerable groups who relied on these platforms to have their voices heard. [...] With fewer resources, some media organizations shifted toward rapid, low-cost publishing models that prioritize speed over verification. This has made it easier for misleading narratives and politically motivated content to spread, especially on social media platforms.

Media support organisation, Jordan

As a result, voices from rural areas and vulnerable groups receive less sustained media attention. [...] Small independent media platforms and community-based information initiatives often rely on partnerships with CSOs for editorial mentoring, research support, or small grants. Funding cuts have made it harder for these initiatives to sustain regular content production, particularly outside major urban centers.

Media support organisation, Bangladesh

Additionally, the reduction in funding has weakened the diversity of voices in the media landscape. Community-based and women-led initiatives have been disproportionately affected, limiting coverage of marginalized groups and critical social issues. Overall, these cuts have not only reduced the quantity of media content, but also its quality, depth, and inclusivity — ultimately impacting the public's access to reliable and representative information.

Media outlet, Syria

Some partners highlighted how funding cuts have undermined their capacity for cross-border collaboration and regional journalism. This type of journalism often requires more resources: it spans multiple languages and journalists from across different regions are involved. As funding is constrained, organisations are left with difficult choices: commissioning fewer productions, reduced translations, and ultimately, a narrower audience and less impact.

The broader political consequences of this erosion are significant. Cross-border journalism fosters knowledge-sharing between regions and brings multiple perspectives on shared issues together. This holds particular importance in conflict areas, where balanced and multidirectional media coverage and exchange is essential.

The domino effect of cuts and foreign agent laws

For some organizations, the challenge of funding cuts and stricter donor requirements is made even more acute due to a rising tide of repressive legislation designed to criminalize their work. These so-called “foreign agent laws” explicitly target organizations receiving international funding, with the intent to restrict, regulate or stigmatise their work.¹⁴ The timing of this rising legal pressure is painful. As foreign agent laws proliferate in many countries surveyed, the resources against such legislation, such as legal defense, safety measures and advocacy initiatives are disappearing.

¹⁴ Civicus (2026). *2024-2025 Foreign agents laws go global*. See: https://publications.civicus.org/publications/foreign-agents-laws-report/2024-2025-foreign-agents-laws-go-global/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

The impact of this legislation - and donors' inadequate response to them - is evident, for example, in Latin America. Partners in El Salvador share that projects have fallen through because of the specific donor requirement of needing to be a legal entity within the country, while newly implemented foreign agent legislation prevented organizations from doing so. Requirements like these painfully expose how donors are disconnected from the realities organizations operate in, and how quickly those realities can shift.

On top of this, we are observing increasing stigmatisation of organisations that receive international funding due to the foreign agents law. The tangible consequences are well outlined by a partner from the South Caucasus Region: *"Some journalists and contributors have become more cautious about cooperating with independent media supported by international organizations, as they fear professional, reputational, and physical risks."*

As projects end and legal pressure is mounting, some organisations are forced to self-exile to protect themselves from state persecution and harassment. Abroad, they face new challenges. Many media outlets do not have legal structures in neighbouring countries that can provide them with support to apply for new projects. And even if they do, respondents shared scenarios in which their newly obtained legal status abroad could not help them to new funding schemes, as two years of existence was an eligibility requirement.

Weakened convening power and less advocacy

Many partners raised the fact that while scaling down operations due to cuts the areas first hit were their ability to continue travel, organize events and engage in advocacy arenas. At first sight this seems a logical choice from a budgeting perspective, but the consequences are substantial. The disappearance of safe spaces where grassroots organisations and activists can convene and exchange, leads to less knowledge sharing, solidarity and joint activities. Furthermore, where dialogue platforms such as roundtables, policy discussions and media-civil society collaboration forums are not taking place or are limited in scope and participation, advocacy and collaboration are severely weakened.

These developments were reported across continents and contexts, but what stood out is that in countries and regions that are facing autocratization at the moment the fact that advocacy can no longer be undertaken is particularly devastating. In practice it means that repressive legislation is no longer being challenged and the capacity to raise awareness around repression is limited. The result is that the outlook for systemic change is grim.

Limited funding reduces the ability to conduct community outreach, advocacy activities, and capacity-building programs. At the same time, activists become more cautious about public engagement due to the absence of institutional support and protection. Overall, reduced funding weakens grassroots civil society and limits the ability of organizations to promote inclusive dialogue, protect minority rights, and support democratic participation.

Civil society organization, Bangladesh

Safety measures and emergency support

The funding crisis has direct safety implications for independent media in two ways: it forces independent media to reduce safety measures and it has an impact on rapid response mechanisms. When it comes to direct safety precautions, 17 out of 57 partners have noted that budget cuts have directly affected their own safety and security measures. When it comes to the very organizations that are able to help journalists in peril, there are similar worrying signs. One partner from Bangladesh notes:

“Organizations that previously provided emergency legal aid, safety training, or rapid response support for journalists facing harassment or legal pressure have scaled down their activities. As a result, some journalists—especially freelancers and reporters outside major cities—now have fewer places to seek support when they encounter threats or professional risks. Decline in training and capacity-building opportunities. Funding reductions have affected programs that trained journalists in areas such as investigative reporting, digital security, fact-checking, and ethical reporting. Several regional workshops and fellowship opportunities have been postponed or cancelled.”

Article 19 also noted that U.S. funded Emergency Programs for media have ended.¹⁵ Still, among our partners there are some signs that emergency support is not the first thing that is cut. Partners in Latin America have explained that emergency lines are still in place in spite of funding cuts. Another partner from Jordan notes: *“Additionally, we observed a shift in funding priorities, with most donors focusing on emergency or crisis-related initiatives. This has made it more difficult for non-crisis projects to secure support, creating gaps in ongoing programs that address long-term community development.”*

¹⁵ Article 19 (2026). Targeted; How Cuts to US Foreign Aid Threaten Freedom of Expression and its Defenders Worldwide. See: https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/ARTICLE-19_Targeted_FINAL_April-2026.pdf.

3. The political and geopolitical outlook

What are the indirect effects of the funding cuts? For this report we asked our respondents to reflect not just on their own situation, but on the indirect effects of the funding cuts; the effect on their political environment and on whether donor gaps were filled by other parties. In response, partners universally express worries about further democratic erosion and authoritarian deepening. Partners observe how funding cuts negatively affect accountability and fosters the dissemination of disinformation and foreign authoritarian narratives. Other frequently heard worries are the increase of polarization and the effect of the budget cuts on certain minorities being heard by the media.

The indirect effects of the funding cuts should be seen against the backdrop of an autocratizing world and an increase of opportunities for autocratic forces to consolidate power. Authoritarian elites generally dislike independent media that monitor their actions. Often, attacks on independent media are part of a broader attempt to erode or break down democracy and prevent the public from holding political elites to account. Generally speaking, breaking down independent media is taking place in the earlier stages of autocratization efforts.¹⁶ The explanation of this order is that meddling with formal democratic institutions such as electoral processes is politically costly when independent media are still able to report independently on such actions and reach substantial audiences. Silencing media thus enhances the possibilities of authoritarian elites to further break down other institutions. Remarkably, it's the U.S. government funding and funding cuts by other Western donors that have now indirectly aided the opportunities for autocratic forces around the globe to erode and break down democracy further.

Direct take-over by autocratic elites

In some cases, partners have observed quite immediate consequences of autocratic actors filling in the gaps that funding cuts have left. In Afghanistan, one partner observed how the cuts provided an opportunity of authoritarian deepening in an already very closed environment:

"There are few donor agencies that have stepped up to support independent media, but the volume is much lower to replace the US funding cut. In Afghanistan, the Taliban regime is now supporting YouTube channels that are funded by their sources and the objective is to show a few positive stories of Afghanistan, and avoid critical reporting."

In a similar vein, a partner in Sudan stated: *"Following funding cuts from the USA and European donors, some alternative donors have stepped in, but their impact has been mixed. In Sudan, a few regional actors and private organizations provided limited support to media outlets, helping sustain investigative reporting and independent journalism. However, in some cases, donors aligned with authoritarian interests have sought to establish their own information channels, promoting narratives favorable to the regime. This illustrates how donor diversification can both support media resilience and introduce political influence risks, depending on the source of funding."*

¹⁶ Sato, Y., Lundstedt, M., Morrison, K., Boese, V. A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2022). Institutional order in episodes of autocratization. *V-Dem Working Paper*, 133.

That same partner explained how the funding directly impacted authoritarian consolidation:

“Funding cuts have contributed to negative political trends in Sudan. When Hamdok was forced to leave the transitional government and replaced by the Al-Burhan regime, the USA and European governments stopped or withheld promised funding. This reduction in support weakened democratic institutions, limited independent oversight, and created space for authoritarian consolidation, illustrating how funding cuts can have direct political consequences beyond their immediate financial impact.”

The diffusion of autocracy

Many partners spoke of the reduction in support creating space for authoritarian consolidation. In authoritarian contexts the lack of funding has accelerated the silencing of independent voices. Journalists, activists, and organizations have lost operational capacity just when repression has intensified, increasing self-censorship and fear. Partners indicate a diminished capacity to sustain long-term investigations and continuous coverage—both of which are critical for producing journalism that holds those in power to account. With reduced teams and fewer resources, coverage is weaker, less research is done, less field reporting is conducted, and fewer in-depth works are published. This weakens democratic control in a context where access to public information is already limited. The loss of reliable information as a democratic counterbalance mechanism has left citizens even more exposed to State propaganda and censorship. This has resulted in State censorship and the official apparatus of propaganda and disinformation reaching one of their highest points of consolidation. The absence of resources has also limited the documentation of abuses, which favors the impunity of the repressive apparatus and reduces international pressure based on verifiable evidence.

Concerns about the information space being overtaken by foreign actors with their own agendas are widely shared. Several media partners reported being approached by foreign actors with offers for either take over of their media platforms or financial support for bringing certain stories. There are indications that alternative funding sources—often less transparent and potentially aligned with State or pro-government interests—are becoming more prominent. This shift risks further influencing editorial independence, pluralism and the diversity of viewpoints in the public sphere. Partners in Venezuela described how several foreign actors from Russia, China, Cuba and Iran invest in broadcasting and training journalists in their country and in Nicaragua. In Venezuela RT en Espanol broadcasts directly to audiences and provides segments broadcast on Telesur and Venezolana Television. They have reported on how Academia RT provides training in several African countries, as well as in Argentina, Mexico and Cuba. It’s an indirect way to approach people who can help amplify pro-Russian narratives in each of those countries, make friends and improve RT’s credibility. With State backing and international cooperation, they train their supporters in techniques and tools that position official messages and displace independent voices on networks.¹⁷

Some media partners also report the risk of foreign media filling some of this void, while not having a thorough understanding of how the local ecosystem of censorship, propaganda, and influence operations work. Without that situational knowledge, it is easier for these media to (unknowingly) reproduce simplifications or narratives promoted by powerful actors.

17 Interviews with multiple anonymous partners in Latin America.

Media partners report a growing dependence on alternative funding sources, which are increasingly tied, explicitly or implicitly, to political or ideological agendas. Especially smaller media outlets outside major cities are increasingly reliant on commercial sponsorships or politically connected funding streams to sustain operations. This can create perceived or real pressure on editorial independence and may discourage reporting on sensitive political or governance issues. Several partners report that as independent media face financial and operational constraints, more politically-aligned or less independent actors appear to have gained greater visibility as they receive robust and consistent financial backing. Furthermore, a majority of partners point to the fact that politically motivated narratives and unchecked information simply spread more easily as they have gained more space because of the decline of independent, reliable information sources.

The funding cuts are also contributing to a broader geopolitical shift in which authoritarian influence is expanding while support for democracy and independent media weakens. In Pakistan, partners describe how “the American withdrawal is extremely serious” and represents “a major setback to all the efforts civil society has made over the past twenty years.” They warn that the reduction in Western support is accelerating authoritarian consolidation and creating space for China and the Pakistani military establishment to further shape the information environment. Partners note that “China loves media control, not independent media,” while the Pakistani military is “building its own digital media ecosystem” focused on controlling digital platforms and online narratives. As funding and support for independent media disappears, Chinese and military-linked actors are increasingly filling the gap through financial incentives, partnerships, and influence operations.

According to our partner in Pakistan, “the military itself has now become a major media organization,” while actors connected to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) are expanding military-controlled digital media networks and approaching journalists with “financial packages and opportunities to work in digital media.” This shift is occurring alongside what partners describe as a growing movement toward authoritarian rule: “there is little doubt that Pakistan is moving toward military dictatorship.” At the same time, international scrutiny is weakening, with fewer actors “speaking out against the military.” Partners further stress that for China “authoritarianism is not seen as a problem,” and that China seeks “elements of its governance model to spill across its borders, including weaker independent media in Pakistan.” The abrupt withdrawal of Western support therefore risks not only weakening independent journalism financially, but also accelerating the diffusion of authoritarian governance models and reducing democratic counterweights in the media landscape.

This report has merely scratched the surface of how foreign authoritarian actors can influence other countries by filling the informational vacuum that the recent funding cuts have left. More research, specifically aimed at looking at how authoritarian powers are stepping into the vacuum that these cuts have left, is needed to get a more complete picture. Nevertheless, examples that some of our partners in Latin America, Sudan and Pakistan provided are worrying because they lay out a certain logic rather than just providing an example. Just like it is beneficial for Europe to export its model of governance, so is it too geopolitically logical for a country like China or Russia to export its governance models and to create reliable authoritarian partners.

More space for sophisticated disinformation

As explained, independent outlets have had to reduce high cost types of journalism such as investigative reporting, analytical coverage, and fact-checking, all of which are essential for countering disinformation and creating informed and resilient societies. Several partners mention that fact-checking platforms can no longer operate at scale, because they had to layoff staff; and the few people left are unable to meet the demand. Several partners reported a noticeable rise in the spread of harmful and misleading content, including the use of deepfake technologies and the widespread sharing of fabricated news across social media platforms, with significant public engagement in the absence of sufficient credible sources capable of rapid verification and response. Among those were many partners working in conflict settings or affected by crises leaving citizens in already tense and vulnerable situations even more vulnerable.

“First, the decline in funding has weakened the role of independent media, especially local outlets in verifying information and producing reliable, professional content. This weakening has contributed to the widespread dissemination of misinformation, particularly in light of ongoing geopolitical tensions, including the escalation related to the U.S. & Iran conflict. With Jordan considered among the countries affected or potentially targeted within this context, the media landscape has become more sensitive, and the circulation of inaccurate news has increased.”

Media Support Organisation, Jordan

With fewer resources, some media organizations shifted toward rapid, low-cost publishing models that prioritize speed over verification. This has made it easier for misleading narratives and politically motivated content to spread, especially on social media platforms. Moreover, actors that do not adhere to ethical journalism standards often fill the gap left by credible media, amplifying biased narratives and further distorting the information landscape. Another partner from Jordan stated:

“As a result, there has been an increased risk of misinformation spreading, as fewer independent actors are able to counter false narratives or provide verified information. In some cases, gaps left by these programs have been filled by organizations with different priorities, sometimes aligning with more centralized or authoritarian agendas, which can influence public discourse and reduce opportunities for critical, independent engagement.”

Media outlet, Jordan

Funding cuts have affected fact-checking initiatives, digital literacy programs, and media monitoring efforts. As a result, there is less systematic capacity to counter misinformation and politically-motivated disinformation. Especially smaller newsrooms often lack the resources to maintain dedicated verification teams. The lack of funding for media programs that previously promoted critical thinking and community awareness, have left audiences more vulnerable to misinformation and more likely to engage with it without verification, especially within a digital environment that lacks sufficient moderation and protection. Furthermore, reduced funding for civic education and media literacy limits citizens' ability to critically engage with information, which may weaken democratic participation and informed public discourse over time.

Another concerning trend is the potential entry of politically aligned funding sources filling the gap left by international donors. In some cases, media initiatives have become more vulnerable to influence from actors with specific political agendas, which can shape editorial lines and reduce independence. Additionally, the decline in funding has disproportionately affected community-based and rights-focused media, including those covering gender and environmental issues. This has narrowed the diversity of perspectives in public discourse and limited coverage of sensitive or marginalized topics.

Media outlet, Syria

Several partners reported that a smear campaign against independent media was launched in their countries spreading the narrative that USAID is a criminal organization and those who receive money from them are criminals who belong in jail. Another narrative pushed was that this support was used to fund propaganda. These smear campaigns have led to personal attacks and threats on social media.

Representation

On the impact on representation, a partner from Bangladesh expressed the following: *“In Bangladesh, funding cuts affecting civil society organizations, particularly those working with LGBTIQ+ communities, have contributed to several negative political and social trends. As international funding decreases, many grassroots organizations have been forced to reduce activities or close entirely. This weakens independent civil society actors who previously played an important role in promoting human rights, civic participation, and public awareness. For example, several grassroots LGBTIQ+ organizations have suspended advocacy programs, community training, and awareness initiatives due to lack of resources. This has also created more space for stigma, misinformation, and conservative narratives targeting marginalized communities.”*

Another partner in Bangladesh corroborated this view: *“[s]everal grassroots LGBTIQ+ organizations have suspended advocacy programs, community training, and awareness initiatives due to lack of resources. This has also created more space for stigma, misinformation, and conservative narratives targeting marginalized communities. Other organizations have also experienced these challenges. Limited funding reduces the ability to conduct community outreach, advocacy activities, and capacity-building programs. At the same time, activists become more cautious about public engagement due to the absence of institutional support and protection. Overall, reduced funding weakens grassroots civil society and limits the ability of organizations to promote inclusive dialogue, protect minority rights, and support democratic participation.”*

In Jordan, our partner expressed the following:

“Funding cuts weaken the cumulative relationship between local media outlets and their audiences. When platforms that once allowed citizens to express their views decline, some individuals may feel marginalized, which negatively affects their trust in public institutions.”

Projects that aimed to enhance youth and women’s participation in public life—such as civic education programs or local election coverage—are directly affected by funding cuts. This has resulted in a decrease in the number of initiatives that promote public dialogue and participation.

4. Why we need strategic investments in independent media - now

In conclusion, we could merely present a long list of recommendations to all stakeholders to list what independent media and journalists need to survive. Instead, we would like to argue that first and foremost a shift in mindset on the part of donors and policy makers is required. As others have said before us, investing in independent media is not charity. At this time of unprecedented autocratization and increasing insecurity, investing in independent media is an essential strategic investment. This report shows the resilience independent media and journalists have shown despite facing a myriad of challenges. It also shows quite clearly that the effects of the cuts correlate with democratic decline. Without funding it is an illusion that independent media can provide a realistic counterweight to democratic backsliding and repression. Without intervention, most of them will not be able to exist within a relatively short timeframe, as there is no market for independent journalism in repressive and authoritarian contexts.

The moment to put independent media centre stage when it comes to an effort to protect democracy is now. The erosion of independent media comes at a particularly dangerous moment. Across many parts of the world, democratic institutions are facing growing pressure from authoritarian actors. Research on democratic backsliding shows that once democratic erosion advances beyond a certain point, reversing it becomes extremely difficult. While democratic recoveries do occur—as seen in countries such as Poland, Brazil and Sri Lanka—they remain the exception rather than the rule and generally autocratize again within five years.¹⁸ Even where democratic forces regain power, they often inherit institutions that have been weakened by years of legal changes, captured state bodies, and entrenched networks of loyalists. The deeper democratic decline progresses, the more difficult and costly democratic recovery becomes.

This is precisely why the role of independent media is so important. Independent journalism does not merely hold political elites accountable by exposing corruption, abuse and misconduct. It also acts as an early warning system when democratic norms begin to erode. Journalists are often among the first to document attacks on democratic institutions, restrictions on civic freedoms, and attempts to concentrate political power. Even in environments where accountability mechanisms have already been weakened, independent media continue to perform a vital function by preserving evidence, documenting abuses, and ensuring that information remains available to citizens and democratic actors. In doing so, independent media create opportunities for democratic resistance and eventual democratic renewal.

This report has demonstrated what happens when the core function of independent media weakens. Partners consistently reported reductions in investigative reporting, community journalism, audience engagement and fact-checking capacity. At the same time, they observed a growing presence of disinformation, propaganda and politically motivated narratives. Several partners described how authoritarian actors, foreign governments, military establishments or politically connected organisations have actively sought to fill the gaps left behind by independent media. In other words, the vacuum created by the decline of independent journalism does not remain empty for long.

18 Bianchi, M., Cheeseman, N., & Cyr, J. (2025). The myth of democratic resilience. *Journal of Democracy*, 36(3), 33-46.

The findings of this report reveal a troubling information dynamic. As reliable information becomes scarcer, misleading information spreads more easily. Independent media organizations that previously verified information are increasingly unable to operate. Partners across different regions reported rising levels of disinformation and growing difficulties in countering authoritarian narratives. This is worrying in light of the existing evidence that disinformation helps autocrats to stay in power, while it makes democratization less likely.¹⁹ Disinformation stabilizes authoritarian regimes and destabilizes democracies. This can be explained by the fact that in a country that is dominated by disinformation, consensus over the government's performance is difficult to establish, and thus, people may be less inclined to mobilize against the regime because of the confusion that is created.

Disinformation thus has profound political consequences. When citizens are unable to distinguish fact from fiction, accountability is hard to achieve. Confusion makes it harder to evaluate a government's performance, organize collectively, and challenge abuses of power. In authoritarian settings, disinformation can reinforce a regime's image and in democracies it can create and deepen polarization

Taken together, the evidence presented in this report points to a clear conclusion. Support for independent media should not be viewed primarily as a matter of solidarity or development assistance. It is a strategic investment in democratic resilience, societal stability and the preservation of an information environment in which facts can compete with propaganda. The decline of independent media is not merely a media-sector problem; it is a governance problem, a democracy problem and, increasingly, a geopolitical problem. For policymakers and donors, the question is therefore not whether independent media are important. The question is whether democracies can afford to allow these institutions to weaken further. Every newsroom that closes, every investigative team that disappears, and every community outlet that falls silent reduces society's ability to resist authoritarian pressure and recover from democratic decline. Simultaneously, every such event constitutes a small decline of European soft power.

Recommendations for future funding

In our previous report "Crisis in Journalism" we presented a summary of the needs of the sector at that time. Logically, these were to a certain extent pointed at mitigating the most immediate and urgent effects of the unexpected funding cuts but for a large part they had already identified the needs which were also articulated by the partners surveyed for this report. They almost unanimously presented the following more specific recommendations to policy makers and donors for what future funding should look like:

Sustainable, long-term funding

Funding frameworks for independent media should reflect a long-term commitment to information access and accountability by moving away from short-term, project-based grants toward sustained, multi-year support. This enables organisations to plan for sustainable operations, such as staff development, ensuring digital and physical security, and responding to volatile political environments. Stable, long-term funding is critical infrastructure for delivering independent information, stronger accountability cultures, and more informed and engaged citizens, and requires generational investment.

Invest in local media

Invest in local and community-based media initiatives. These outlets have been disproportionately affected by the funding cuts, even though they serve as the primary source of information for (marginalized) communities and fulfill a key role in providing reliable information in areas where it is most limited. Reduced support risks creating information vacuums that can easily be filled by misinformation or politically influenced narratives.

19 Sato, Y., & Wiebrecht, F. (2024). Disinformation and regime survival. *Political research quarterly*, 77(3), 1010-1025.

Donor coordination

Implement stronger coordination among international donors to reduce funding gaps and avoid duplication. Use civil society organisations who understand local context, risks, and operational realities as critical sounding boards for funding strategies.

Support cross-border collaboration and convening power

Funders should recognize collaborative and cross-border journalism as a distinct investment category warranting dedicated, flexible support. This model has proven a powerful tool for building resilient regional information ecosystems and enabling accountability investigations that no single newsroom could pursue alone, while also distributing risk for journalists operating in repressive environments. Its sustainability depends on coordination infrastructure, shared resources, and trust-building across teams, all of which require intentional and ongoing investment.

Emergency and rapid-response mechanisms

Strengthen emergency funding mechanisms to help independent media organizations respond quickly to sudden disruptions, such as the adoption of discriminatory laws, political crises or funding cuts. This allows outlets to absorb shocks without shutting down.

Simple and flexible funding processes

Donors must introduce simpler processes and more flexible rules and payment mechanisms to allow independent media to continue working with journalists and contributors in sensitive regions. This is essential to reduce administrative burden and ensure the safety of those involved.

Collaborate with intermediaries

The investments in local media should not be seen as a substitute for collaboration with intermediaries but as complementary. Intermediary organizations can be crucial in support for in-country partners. While access to intermediaries can provide access to international networks, it is also crucial to recognize that it is often more politically costly to repress internationally operating intermediaries. Thereby, intermediaries can reduce risks for in-country partners, including those targeted by foreign agent laws. Intermediaries can advocate for alternative funding modalities that do not put local recipients targeted by foreign agent laws at risk.

The "Authoritarian Utopia"

The impact of funding cuts on independent media

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