# "MONITORING MEDIASCAPES FOR DEMOCRATIC COMMUNICATION IN EUROPE", BRUSSELS, BELGIUM, FEBRUARY 15, 2024

The "Monitoring Mediascapes for Democratic Communication in Europe" conference, held on February 15, 2024, at the Residence Palace in Brussels, marked the culmination of the EU-funded Mediadelcom project. This three-year initiative examined the risks and opportunities for deliberative communication across 14 European countries, aiming to enhance the media's role in supporting democratic processes. The conference featured keynote speeches, panel discussions, and a roundtable addressing the media's role in democracy, freedom of expression, and combating polarisation during an election year (2024). Experts from various fields, including media sociology and journalism, presented findings on risks and opportunities for deliberative communication in Europe. The event offered a platform for policymakers, media professionals, and academics to engage in critical discussions on safeguarding democratic values and freedom of expression in an evolving media landscape.

The conference brought together leading experts in media sociology, journalism, and policy. Key contributors included Zrinjka Peruško, a professor of media sociology from the University of Zagreb, presented the Croatian perspective and Mediadelcom's contributions; Marius Dragomir, the Director of the Media and Journalism Research Center, discussed transformative strategies for European media; Eric Heinze, a professor at Queen Mary University and author of *The Most Human Right: Why Free Speech is Everything*, provided insights into the significance of free expression in democratic governance; Renate Schroeder, Director of the European Federation of Journalists, shed light on challenges facing journalism and the implications of the European Media Freedom Act; Laura Becana Ball, Advocacy and Policy Manager at the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), emphasized global media development trends; Ioana Avădani, President of the Center for Independent Journalism in Romania, offered perspectives on Eastern Europe's media challenges; Michał Głowacki, Professor at the University of Warsaw, discussed innovative approaches to media policy.

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## OPENING OF THE CONFERENCE

The event started with a series of welcoming speeches by Halliki Harro-Loit, a Professor of Journalism at the University of Tartu and the primary coordinator of the Mediadelcom project. She introduced the project's objectives, emphasising that it has developed new methods and concepts to enhance further research on the role of media in democracy. Harro-Loit said: "We have also created, based on methods and concepts, some policy recommendations that I hope will have an impact and will change the way of our thinking about media development in the future". Secondly, Andrea Miconi presented insights from the complementary EUMEPLAT project. He highlighted that there are still many things to do in the area of mediating in society. Meanwhile, Epp Lauk (Institute of Social Studies of the University of Tartu) presented publications and posters connected with the results of the Mediadelcom project.

## THE KEYNOTE SPEECHES

The keynotes emphasised the media's role in fostering democratic dialogue amid increasing polarisation. Zrinjka Peruško highlighted the project's findings, focusing on how deliberative communication can help counter democratic backsliding. As she said at the very beginning of the speech: "We should think what media do for the democracies". She considered the role of the media in creating democracy and explained the social role of deliberative communication in the media space. She emphasised that the Mediadelcom project concentrated on the aspect of deliberative communication rather than solely on deliberative democracy, which is also influenced by the state of media systems in various countries. Sshe presented some results regarding the media's contribution to the development of deliberative communication and pointed out: "The results are the effect of the team efforts. The research would not have been possible without the financial support of the European Commission", thereby emphasising the need to continue further research and international cooperation.

Marius Dragomir addressed systemic reforms needed to safeguard European media ecosystems from political and economic pressures. In his speech, Dragomir clearly emphasises the role of media funding and the dangers that arise from the capture of the media and, thus, the quality of democracy. Therefore, it is essential to have sustainable media funding and regular monitoring of the media, keeping both public and commercial resources in mind. Dragomir also spoke about the phenomenon of atomisation in media financing: "The atomisation model facilitates media capture, and this is a major threat that occurs not only in Eastern European countries but also in many other countries".

## THE PANEL DISCUSSIONS

Another part of the meeting was panel discussions on *Media for Democracy: Crossing the East/West Divide* and *Freedom of expression and freedom of information – who are the agents under pressure and which agents have too much power*? Both panels were chaired by Tanya Sakzewski from the Media Diversity Institute (UK). The first panel, entitled *Media for Democracy: Crossing the East/West Divide*, looked for answers to questions such as: How can the findings of the Mediadelcom project help in improving democracy in both Eastern and Western Europe? Additionally, how can the risks be turned into opportunities? Panelists included previous keynote speakers (Marius Dragomir, Zrinjka Peruško) and Eric Heinze (Professor of Law & Humanities Executive Director, Centre for Law, Democracy, and Society), and Ioana Avădani (President of the ICJ, Romania, Mediadelcom member). The panellists explored strategies to overcome media capture in Eastern Europe and lessons applicable across the continent. This session explored disparities in media freedom between Eastern and Western Europe, with particular emphasis on combating media capture in Eastern regions. For example, Heinze discussed the urgent need for a clear definition of inclusion and exclusion in the contemporary communication system. Avădani spoke of the need for media literacy from the early educational process, and currently, the role of media education is being overlooked. On the other hand, Dragomir highlighted that "we are at the moment of the transformation media system in Europe. And I don't say in a negative way here. In many ways, there are also opportunities"..

The second panel was dedicated to *Freedom of expression and freedom of information – who are the agents under pressure, and which agents have too much power?* Panelists included Renate Schroeder (Director, European Federation of Journalists), Laura Becana Ball (Advocacy and Policy Manager, Global Forum for Media Development – GFMD), Michał Głowacki (Professor, University of Warsaw, Mediadelcom member), and Marcus Kreutler (Researcher, Erich Brost Institute for International Journalism, Germany, Mediadelcom member). Panelists sought answers to questions: What can the EU's flagship European Media Freedom Act, which is aimed at protecting journalists and the media from threats and interference, learn from the findings of the Mediadelcom project? Panelists examined the tension between free expression and regulation, considering the implications of the European Media Freedom Act. Schroeder stated that the current state of media freedom is not ideal. However, there are many ongoing initiatives aimed at improvement, such as the European Media Freedom Act. Conversely, Ball emphasised the importance of seeking solutions not only within media organisations but also in civic networks, including media support organisations and journalistic unions. Głowacki added that "participation is important for deliberative communication", having in mind, for example, the use of the right to vote by citizens, which is still a problem in many countries.

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## THE ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

The event concluded with an interactive roundtable on *Monitoring Mediascapes for Wisdom-Based Media Governance*. This session brought together all speakers and key panellists to discuss collaborative strategies involving academia, media industries, and policymakers to promote ethical and wisdom-based approaches to media governance. The chair was Daniel Hallin, Professor Emeritus, Professor of Graduate Division, University of California, San Diego, and Mediadelcom Advisory Board member. Participants in the discussion included Maria Juferva-Skuratovski (MP, Estonia), Halliki Harro-Loit (Mediadelcom Principal Investigator), Anne Leppäjärvi (Vice-President of the European Journalism Training Association), Boguslawa Dobek-Ostrowska (Mediadelcom Advisory Board member). Harro-Loit emphasised that „the media policy requires data from grassroots organisations" to implement recommendations effectively. Juferva-Skuratovski addressed the challenges posed by social media platforms, which serve as communication tools but are also significant venues for propaganda. Conversely, Dobek-Ostrowska pointed out that the political and civil culture within society is still not at an optimal level, indicating a need for further education. Additionally, Anne Leppäjärvi discussed the importance of incorporating more research into the educational process to better educate young people.

## KEY OUTCOMES AND INSIGHTS

The last part was devoted to summarising the eight-hour conference and identifying the main conclusions. The conference provided valuable insights into the media's critical role in supporting informed citizenry and deliberative democracy, particularly during election years (around 60 elections worldwide). Attendees emphasised the urgent need to combat disinformation, polarisation, and media capture to ensure that media serves as a pillar of democratic governance. To summarise, the Mediadelcom project's findings and recommendations aim to inform future policy directions and foster stronger partnerships among stakeholders in Europe's media landscape.

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