Community Media Forum Europe protests against softening of funding conditions for non-commercial local radio stations

The Community Media Forum Europe (CMFE) condemns the decision of the Saxon Media Council to classify a private advertising-financed radio station as a non-commercial local radio station (NKL) and to include it in the associated funding. Taking this step before verifiable concepts are available is unacceptable. Such concepts must include participatory, non-profit, and non-profit-oriented working methods and organizational structures that are clearly independent of commercial enterprises. Furthermore, concepts should outline how a program can be designed for social gain and community benefit, strengthening diversity of opinion and commitment to inclusive and intercultural practices.

The premature approval for funding as NKL undermines the decades-long voluntary efforts of Saxony’s non-commercial local radio stations - specifically community media - for diversity and freedom of information on air and also sets a dangerous precedent.

The unclear classification of community media, which are managed as private non-commercial local radio stations in the German federal states, leads to the undermining of comprehensible and democratic criteria and this mockery of civil society. This is an approach that we at the European CMFE network and the organizations and associations organized in it cannot tolerate under any circumstances and against which we strongly protest.

We hereby urge the Saxon Regulatory Authority for Private Broadcasting and New Media (SLM) to make clear classifications with the involvement of civil society and thus create support that follows the recommendations of the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers to member states on media pluralism and transparency in media ownership (2018) and the Joint Declaration on Media Freedom and Democracy (by OSCE, UN, OAS, ACHPR - 2023). These are:
1. Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)1 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to member states on media pluralism and transparency in media ownership (adopted on 07.03.2018)

Relevant excerpts:

In the introductory text: Independent and sustainable public offerings and non-commercial community media can act as a counterweight to media concentration. Due to the importance of their mission, public media offerings are particularly suited to addressing the information needs and interests of all parts of society, including community media and their participating users. It is of utmost importance that the mission of public media services is to take responsibility for political pluralism and to promote awareness of diverse opinions in particular by providing opportunities for different groups in society - including cultural, linguistic, ethnic, religious, sexual, or other minorities - to receive and disseminate information, express themselves and exchange ideas.

In: 2. Media pluralism and diversity of media content
2. 11 States should encourage the establishment and functioning of particular, regional, local, and noncommercial community media, including by providing financial mechanisms to promote their development. Such independent media give societies and individuals a voice on issues that correspond to their respective needs and interests, and in this way are the tool to promote the publication of their issues that may not be represented in the mainstream media, facilitating the inclusive and participatory process of dialog within and across communities at a regional and local level.

In: 5. media literacy and education
States should encourage all media, without hindering their editorial independence, to develop media literacy through principles, policies, and measures. Public media services can play leading roles in the dissemination of media literacy through their objectives, mandates, and working practices. States can also promote media literacy through supportive models for media, taking into account the specific role of public and community media.
2. Joint Declaration on Media Freedom and Democracy (by OSCE, UN, OAS, ACHPR) (adopted on 02.05.2023)
https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/542676

Relevant excerpts:
In: General principles: The role of the media in democracy, d)
Minority, local, and community media are important elements of media pluralism and they ensure that the interests, demands, and needs of society as a whole are visible and known to the public. Such media are particularly important for those in society who have historically been marginalized, systematically disadvantaged, or excluded from public discourse.

In: Recommendations: Ensuring media can play their role in democracy In order to promote, protect, and create an enabling environment for media freedom, States should: c)
Support and promote minority, local, and community media that address issues and topics in local languages that are relevant to the needs of the community, that publish topics that are not covered in mainstream media, and that provide local perspectives on mainstream issues.

3. Definition of community media by the Council of Europe in "Freedom of Expression:
https://rm.coe.int/leaflet-community-media-ger-january-2020/1680a018ff
among others:
Community media take the form of broadcasting and/or multimedia projects and have some of the following characteristics: Independence from governments, commercial enterprises, religious institutions, and political parties; non-profit orientation; voluntary participation of civil society members in the elaboration and management of programs; activities aimed at social gain and community benefit; ownership and accountability to local communities and/or communities of interest they serve; commitment to inclusive and intercultural practices. Community media are civil society organizations, usually incorporated as legal entities, that offer and encourage participation at different levels of their structures. Also referred to as the “third media sector”, community media have a clearly defined identity alongside national public service media and private commercial media.
The support and promotion of community media, which is internationally recognized as important and necessary, is not currently provided in a targeted manner in Saxony and has not yet been anchored in the Saxon Media Act. The practical softening of the funding conditions and requirements for non-commercial local radio stations, which allows private non-participative and non-business broadcasters to access the already insufficient funding, is to be seen as a direct weakening of the community radios active in Saxony - Radio Blau (Leipzig), Radio Zett (Zittau), ColoRadio (Dresden), Radio Z (Chemnitz). On behalf of our members from all over Europe, we strongly condemn this development.

We ask the SLM to examine more closely the economic remoteness of the new non-commercial provider. Furthermore, we ask them, in cooperation with the other state media authorities and politicians, to do the following:

1. Creation of uniform criteria for all German community media in consultation with existing community media (so far mainly organized in the Bundesverband Freier Radios, BFR)

2. Establishment of reliable and sustainable financial support for community media that meets the criteria of economic and state independence

3. Provision of frequencies for community media both on the radio (FM, DAB+) and, in the future, on television.

4. Democratically comprehensible involvement of civil society

Vladimir Radinović
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