

Hellenic Observatory Research Calls Programme

**Fostering Genuine Media Pluralism in Greece's Digital Age.
Addressing the Lack of
Diversity and Ownership Influence in Online Media**

Policy Brief

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The Paradox of Media (Un)freedom in Greece

Greece's media landscape presents a paradox: while it boasts a high number of media outlets, particularly in the online sphere, the country appears to rank low in press freedom, and high in media capture, and risk. This paradox of high numerical fragmentation juxtaposed with low quality of press is further compounded by alarmingly low levels of public trust in the media.

Scholarly and investigative journalism work has highlighted Greece to have low levels of journalistic independence and pluralism suggesting a media environment susceptible to instrumentalization and self-censorship. Despite a high rate of information and data literacy, the pervasive issue of disinformation and the lack of comprehensive countermeasures to combat financial and political influence further erode the media's role in fostering a healthy democratic discourse. This situation has significant implications for the quality of democratic discourse hindering the media's ability to hold power accountable.

The Greek media system is facing a prolonged and deeply troubling crisis, consistently ranking lowest in the European Union for press freedom over the past three years (2022-2024) according to the *Reporters Without Borders* (Reporters sans frontières - RSF)ⁱ. The European University Institute's Media Pluralism Monitor, gives Greece the highest risk score among the countries studied (especially in digital markets), pointing to mounting concerns about the impact of ownership concentration and commercial influence on editorial independence.ⁱⁱ This decline reflects a media environment where journalistic autonomy is increasingly compromised, and structural safeguards are alarmingly weak.

At the heart of the issue is significant media capture, with private media dominantly owned by a handful of wealthy families and entrepreneurs with far-reaching interests in sectors like shipping, finance, and energy.ⁱⁱⁱ This nexus of business and political elites shapes the content and orientation of much of the country's media, with major outlets often aligned with specific political agendas. Financial reliance on state funding and advertising makes many outlets susceptible to government pressure, as starkly illustrated by the "Stay at Home" Campaign (or "Petsas list") scandal, where public funds were distributed to media with minimal transparency.^{iv}

The Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2023 underscores the digital media market's fragmentation in Greece, attributing it to a wide array of digital news sources and the prevalent use of social media for news consumption.^v The numerical fragmentation coexists with a concerning lack of genuine pluralism in content and viewpoints. Research indicates that while numerous digital outlets exist, the system is characterized by a thematic non-divergence, similar patterns in news stances, and significant reproduction of news agency

Background and Context: The Illusion of Pluralism in Online Media

Additionally, similar trends are found when looking in the actual content of websites. The study uses two content metrics, one measuring polarity (positive vs negative news) and a second measuring the overall stance towards the government (in particular the Mitsotakis second term during 2024). The overall online media system exhibits a slightly negative sentiment on political news. A slight majority of articles lean towards an anti-government stance. However, the clustering of websites based on these metrics reveals that a large proportion of outlets exhibit similar content. Figure 1 shows that 84% of the examined websites show somewhat negative but pro-government content, while a significantly smaller group is more markedly negative and anti-government. This clustering suggests that the spectrum of viewpoints might be narrower than the number of outlets implies.

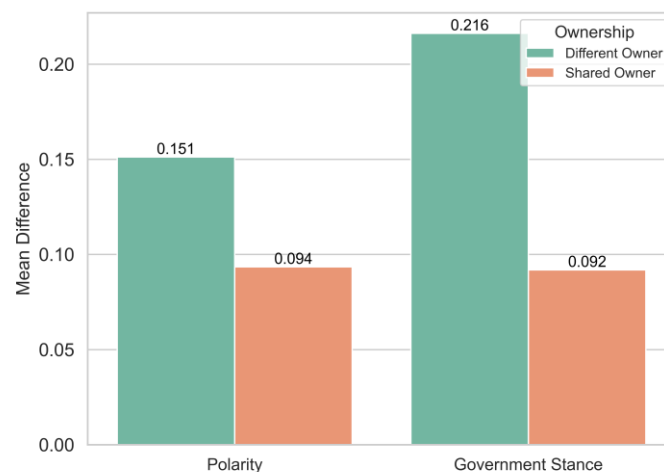
Figure 1 is a scatter plot showing the relationship between General Stance (Weighted) on the x-axis and Mean Polarity on the y-axis. The plot includes data points for various news sources, categorized into Noise (grey), Cluster 1 (11%) (teal), and Cluster 2 (84%) (orange). Cluster 1 is a small group of points in the bottom-left, while Cluster 2 is a large, elongated group of points extending from the bottom-left towards the top-right. The plot is divided into three regions by two red lines: a small teal region for Cluster 1, a large orange region for Cluster 2, and a grey region for Noise.

A significant factor contributing to this content homogenization is the considerable level of news agency content reproduction. The study found that a substantial portion of articles across various online outlets closely resemble content originating from the state-owned agency AMNA. The overall system-wide level of agency content reproduction stands at 17.56%. Alarming, some websites exhibit reproduction rates as high as 60%. While reliance on news agencies can be a practical necessity due to resource constraints in newsrooms, the excessively high duplication rates in some Greek online outlets can obscure genuine editorial independence and significantly limit the diversity of original reporting and perspectives available to the public.

The relatively small number of powerful entrepreneurs own a substantial segment of the online media landscape. This trend extends to the online landscape. This small group of entrepreneurs accounts for approximately 29% of online traffic in news websites in Greece. At the same time, online media owned by the same group of entrepreneurs received 38% of all funding from the so-called “Petsas list”.

However, these owners seem to heavily impact news content diversity. Empirical evidence shows a clear correlation between common ownership and reduced differences in news content. Figure 2 shows the average differences between all pairs of websites split by whether they belong to the same owner or not for *polarity* and *stance towards the government*. It shows that when two websites belong to the same owner, they are significantly more likely to publish similar news content. This finding strongly suggests that ownership structures in Greece exert a considerable influence on the content produced, potentially leading to a less diverse information ecosystem.

Figure 2. The Impact of Common Ownership on News Content Differences between Websites



Existing legal provisions are weak

Greece’s rules for regulating (online) media are still quite weak, even though some steps have been taken recently. The implementation of Law 5005/2022 helped launch the updated Electronic Press Register (*Μητρώο Ηλεκτρονικού Τύπου - ΜΗΤ*) in 2023 (to replace the

previous iteration first introduced in 2015) was a positive move, making it easier to see who owns digital media outlets. However, enforcing these rules is still a problem with a large number of outlets deciding not to register. Although there are laws and a Code of Ethics from Internet Publishers Association (ENED) that deal with hate speech and ownership transparency, their real impact is still unclear. Stronger rules are needed to rebuild trust in the media.

One major issue is the lack of data on the online advertising market and on how many people use the biggest digital platforms. Traffic data is only available by third party Search Engine Optimization (SEO) companies. Because this information is not available, it is hard to know how concentrated the market is or how that affects media diversity. Older laws, like Law 3592/2007, were meant to limit media concentration but do not apply to online media. More recent laws, such as Law 4996/2022, bring Greece in line with EU rules on copyright and broadcasting rights but still ignore the specific risks around digital news media ownership.

Furthermore, media regulators and public media lack the resources and true independence to alleviate the situation. The Hellenic Competition Commission (HCC), which oversees competition across industries, has not done much to tackle the specific challenges of digital media concentration. The National Council for Radio and Television (*Εθνικό Συμβούλιο Ραδιοτηλεόρασης - ΕΣΡ*) although officially an independent authority, its members are appointed by a parliamentary committee dominated by the ruling party, making the appointment process prone to political influence. Public service media like the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation (ERT) and the Athens-Macedonian News Agency (AMNA) have long suffered from political interference and economic dependence, with documented instances of censorship and one-sided pro-government reporting.

At the same time, tax rules have not been updated for the digital age, allowing unfair competition to continue. Greece has also not yet put into practice the EU's 2022 directive on minimum taxation for big companies. These gaps make it even harder to ensure fair competition and proper regulation in the digital media space.

Finally, digital-native media do not have any specific legal protections. This leaves them open to being taken over or crowded out by bigger players, something that current general laws do not fully address. EMFA's mandate to Member States to reform national media laws to combat media capture gives Greece a much-needed chance to strengthen its media rules and catch up with the realities of the digital world.

Policy Recommendations: Towards a More Pluralistic Media Ecosystem

To effectively address the identified challenges and foster a more genuine and robust media pluralism within Greece's online space, the following actionable policy recommendations are proposed:

- **Enhance Transparency of Digital Media Ownership and Control:** Building upon the foundation of the existing Electronic Press Register, it is imperative to implement more stringent and comprehensive regulations mandating the provision of easily accessible information regarding the ultimate beneficial owners (UBOs) of all digital media outlets operating within Greece. This should include granular details of both

direct and indirect ownership structures, as well as any instances of cross-ownership across different media entities. Similarly to what other reports have suggested, Law 3592/2007 should be explicitly extended to encompass the digital media landscape, establishing clear and enforceable thresholds for acceptable levels of ownership concentration in the online sphere.

- **Promote and Safeguard Editorial Independence and Counter Undue Influence:** Establish clear and legally binding guidelines for editorial charters that define the principles and practices of editorial autonomy within media outlets. Additionally, consider the implementation of mechanisms to create safe institutions for journalists to report breaches in editorial independence. Explore the development of incentives or dedicated funding mechanisms specifically designed to support media outlets that demonstrably commit to upholding strong principles of editorial independence and actively strive to present a diverse range of viewpoints in their reporting.
- **Actively Support Diverse and High-Quality Journalism:** Implement forward-looking policies that actively encourage the development of a variety of sustainable revenue models for media outlets operating in Greece, with a particular focus on supporting independent and local media organizations. Reducing the over-reliance on a limited number of potentially partisan funding sources is crucial for fostering a more resilient and independent media ecosystem. Explore the feasibility of requiring stringent financial transparency reporting for all media regardless of size and funding/revenue model.
- **Establish a Robust and Independent Media Monitoring Mechanism:** In direct alignment with recommendations aimed at enhancing the overall media environment in Greece, and independent of specific EMFA requirements, it is essential to establish a fully independent body with a clear mandate and sufficient resources to comprehensively monitor media pluralism across the Greek media landscape and beyond. This monitoring should encompass the diversity of content, the range of viewpoints presented, and the structure of media ownership in both traditional and digital media sectors. It should ideally provide traffic metrics and advertising data. This independent mechanism should be mandated to regularly publish comprehensive reports on the state of media pluralism in Greece, drawing upon both rigorous and state-of-the-art research practice. These reports should be widely disseminated to contribute to informed public debate and provide a solid evidence base for future policy adjustments aimed at strengthening media pluralism. Hosting this crucial monitoring mechanism within a reputable media studies department of a major Greek university, where it can be run by media scholars, could significantly bolster its independence, ensure its academic rigor, and enhance public trust in its findings, while also benefiting the academic community.

Key Insights

- Despite the large number of online media outlets in Greece, the actual diversity of content and viewpoints is limited.
- The Greek media system is suffering from low press freedom, and elevated media capture and risk.
- Concentrated media ownership significantly reduces the diversity of perspectives presented in online news.
- High rates of news agency content reproduction contribute to the homogenization of the news agenda.
- Policy interventions are needed to enhance transparency, safeguard editorial independence, and support a more pluralistic media ecosystem.
- Establishing an independent media monitoring mechanism is crucial for tracking progress and informing research-based future policy decisions.

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ⁱ <https://rsf.org/en/index>

ⁱⁱ Papadopoulou, L., & Angelou, I. (2024). Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era : application of the media pluralism monitor in the European member states and in candidate countries in 2023. Country report : Greece. European University Institute.

ⁱⁱⁱ The International Press Institute (IPI)'s Media Capture Monitoring Report: Greece (2024). Available at <https://ipi.media/publications/media-capture-monitoring-report-greece/>

^{iv} A fund for supporting the country's media industry due to financial stress induced by the Covid-19 pandemic. It was broadly and heavily criticised for the lack of transparency among other things (Souvlis, & Milonas, 2024). Journalistic investigation revealed that the outlets opposing the government received a disproportionately low share of the funds. See more at <https://govwatch.gr/en/reports/greece-s-parliamentary-election-and-the-rule-of-law/>

^v Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Robertson, C. T., Ross Arguedas, A., & Nielsen, R. K. (2024). Reuters Institute digital news report 2024. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.