

Aspects regarding European regulations and the current situation of mass media

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Abstract

Recent Eurobarometer data (2025) indicate that Romania remains among the European Union (member states with the highest levels of perceived exposure to disinformation and fake news. This article examines the Romanian case in comparative perspective, situating it within broader European trends and analyzing the potential implications for societal resilience, democratic trust, and media ecosystems. The study also discusses the relevance of Regulation 2024/1083, known as the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), as a structural response to vulnerabilities in the European information space. The European Media Freedom Act (Regulation 2024/1083) becomes applicable across the European Union on 8 August 2025, introducing a harmonized framework aimed at strengthening media independence, transparency, and resilience to political and economic interference. Although directly applicable in all Member States, the regulation requires national adjustments to ensure effective implementation. This article examines Romania's legislative and institutional efforts to align with EMFA requirements, highlighting progress, persistent gaps, and broader implications for media governance and democratic resilience.

Keywords: media, regulation, trust, disinformation, implications

Introduction

Romania's high perceived exposure to disinformation underscores the fragility of its information ecosystem and the urgency of comprehensive regulatory and educational interventions. The European Media Freedom Act provides a robust framework for enhancing media independence, transparency, and resilience across the EU. For Romania, its successful implementation could represent a pivotal step toward strengthening democratic culture and mitigating the societal impact of disinformation. The proliferation of disinformation has become a defining challenge for contemporary democracies, particularly in societies marked by institutional distrust, political polarization, and high reliance on digital platforms. Romania exemplifies this dynamic. According to the 2025 Eurobarometer, 55% of Romanian respondents reported being exposed to disinformation "often" or "very often" in the previous seven days. This figure is surpassed only by Hungary (57%) and significantly exceeds the EU average of 36%. By contrast, countries such as Finland and Germany report much lower levels of perceived exposure (26%). These findings raise critical questions

regarding the robustness of Romania's information environment and the capacity of its citizens to navigate increasingly complex media ecosystems. The Eurobarometer data highlight several notable patterns: High perceived exposure in Romania (55%), Hungary (57%), and Spain (52%), suggesting structural vulnerabilities in these media ecosystems. Low perceived exposure in Finland and Germany (26%), countries traditionally associated with strong public service media and high levels of media literacy. A small minority of Romanian respondents (3%) report never encountering fake news, suggesting limited awareness of the ubiquity of digital misinformation. Importantly, the authors of the study emphasize that these figures reflect perceptions, not the objective volume of disinformation. Nevertheless, perception itself is a critical variable, as it shapes trust in institutions, media consumption habits, and susceptibility to manipulation. Romania's elevated perception of exposure to disinformation can be linked to several systemic factors: High reliance on social media as a primary source of news; Persistent political polarization, which amplifies the circulation of partisan narratives; Low institutional trust, which weakens the public's ability to distinguish between credible and non-credible sources; fragmented media markets, where economic pressures may compromise editorial independence. These conditions collectively undermine societal resilience to information manipulation.

In response to growing concerns about media independence and information integrity, the EU adopted Regulation 2024/1083, establishing a common framework for media services within the internal market. The regulation—known as the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)—pursues several key objectives:

Strengthening Editorial Freedom and Independence - The EMFA obliges member states to respect and safeguard the effective editorial autonomy of media service providers. It also introduces protections for journalistic sources and confidential communications, including safeguards against unlawful surveillance and the use of spyware.

Ensuring the Independent Functioning of Public Service Media - The regulation requires transparent, stable funding mechanisms for public service media and sets clear rules for appointing and dismissing management bodies to prevent political interference.

Enhancing Transparency in Media Ownership and State Advertising: Media providers must disclose essential information, including legal identity, ownership structures, and contact details. The regulation also introduces transparency requirements for the allocation of state advertising; a domain often associated with political influence.

Under the Digital Services Act framework, very large online platforms must justify any removal of professionally produced media content and provide safeguards against unjustified takedowns.

Promoting Cross-Border Media Operations and Digital Transformation - The EMFA aims to facilitate cross-border provision of media services and support the sector's adaptation to digital technologies.

Strengthening Regulatory Cooperation - The regulation replaces the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA) with the European Board for Media Services; an independent advisory body composed of national media authorities. Its mandate includes ensuring consistent implementation of EU media law and coordinating responses to challenges originating both within and outside the EU.

For Romania, the EMFA represents a significant opportunity to address structural weaknesses in the media landscape: Greater transparency may reduce the influence of opaque ownership structures; Stronger protections for journalists could counteract pressures that undermine investigative reporting; Improved regulatory coordination may help

Romania align with best practices across the EU; Safeguards against platform-driven content removal could stabilize the visibility of credible journalism. However, the regulation's effectiveness will depend on national implementation, political will, and the capacity of Romanian institutions to enforce the new standards. The European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) represents a landmark regulatory initiative designed to safeguard editorial independence, enhance transparency of media ownership, and protect journalists from undue interference. While the regulation is directly applicable in all EU Member States, its practical enforcement depends on the existence of national mechanisms capable of supporting its provisions. In Romania, the Ministry of Culture initiated the legislative adaptation process in 2025, announcing a series of reforms intended to align domestic law with EMFA before the regulation's mandatory application date. The Romanian case illustrates both the opportunities and the structural constraints associated with implementing a comprehensive European media governance framework.

According to official communications from August 2025, the Ministry of Culture coordinated the update of national legislation to incorporate EMFA requirements. The main areas targeted for reform included: Revision of audiovisual legislation, particularly definitions of media service providers and editorial control; Updating legal protections for journalists and their sources, including safeguards against abusive surveillance; Introducing transparency obligations regarding media ownership; Preparing national institutions for cooperation with the European Board for Media Services. These measures were intended to ensure that Romania's legal framework would not hinder the direct application of EMFA. Romania initiated work on public registries identifying the real owners of media institutions and reporting obligations for media service providers. Draft norms were prepared to regulate the Transparent allocation of publicly funded advertising and the annual reporting of public expenditures directed toward media outlets. Reforms focused on: Rules prohibiting abusive surveillance; Strengthening the protection of journalistic sources; Mechanisms for reporting political or economic pressure. Proposed measures included: Guarantees separating editorial decisions from owners' interests; Rules governing the appointment and dismissal of editorial leadership in public service media. Despite these efforts, Romania has not adopted a single comprehensive EMFA implementation law—nor is one required—but secondary legislation may still be necessary. No public report currently details Romania's full compliance status, and several mechanisms remain incomplete or non-operational. Although EMFA is directly applicable and cannot be ignored by national authorities, courts, or media providers, Romania's practical implementation remains uneven. Some provisions are already enforceable, while others exist only at a declarative or partial stage. EMFA is more than a European regulatory text; it is an opportunity to reinforce media freedom and democratic resilience. For Romania, its effective implementation requires coordinated action across three levels: Institutions that enforce the regulation, newsrooms that use its legal tools, civil society that monitors and demands accountability. Only through this multi-layered approach can EMFA evolve from a legal framework into a tangible guarantee of media freedom in Romania.

Furthermore, the European Commission will support the European media sector not only in becoming more resilient, but also in remaining competitive at both European and global levels, by combining investment instruments with policy actions. To achieve these objectives, the communication strategy is structured around three thematic pillars and ten concrete actions:

1. Recovery: Supporting audiovisual and media companies in weathering the current crisis and ensuring liquidity and financial assistance through: the provision of an interactive tool offering European audiovisual and news media enterprises guidance on the various EU support mechanisms available; stimulating investment to boost European audiovisual production and distribution by strengthening capital investment in this sector; launching a “NEWS” initiative that will bring together actions and support measures dedicated to the news media industry.

2. Transformation: Addressing structural challenges and helping the industry navigate the dual green and digital transition into an increasingly competitive global environment. This will be achieved through: creating a “European Media Data Space” to support media companies in data sharing and the development of innovative solutions; promoting a European industrial coalition in virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR) to enable EU media to benefit from advances in immersive technologies; supporting the industry in achieving climate neutrality by 2050 by facilitating the exchange of best practices and strengthening the environmental sustainability dimension within the Creative Europe MEDIA Program.

3. Facilitation and Empowerment: Establishing the conditions necessary for greater innovation in the sector while ensuring genuinely fair competition and empowering citizens to access content more easily and make informed decisions. This includes: launching a dialogue with the audiovisual industry to agree on concrete measures to improve access to and availability of audiovisual content across the EU; promoting European media talent through mentoring and training, as well as through research and support for promising European media start-ups; improving media literacy to empower citizens, by providing Member States with a toolkit and guidelines regarding the new media literacy obligations under the AVMSD, and supporting the creation of independent alternative news aggregation services capable of offering a diverse set of accessible information sources; strengthening the cooperation framework among European media regulators within the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA).

Modernity records successive histories of the major mass communication media. Each medium has emerged forcefully, only to retreat later and make room for another, more promising one. This has been the case with the book, the printed press, film, and radio. The term “press” refers to all forms of communication capable of reaching a very large audience. The press is a form of expression of freedom of thought that contributes to the formation of public opinion. It facilitates the exchange of ideas and the pluralism of perspectives.

Particularly important is the remarkable rise of public opinion in modern society. Some have called it a “capricious modern despot.” What is certain is that public opinion plays a decisive role in electoral outcomes and in the evaluation of governments. Securing public approval has become an axiomatic element of modern governance. Ultimately, legitimacy is granted by public opinion. This is not necessarily an entirely positive development, but it is an essential feature of modern life that cannot be ignored.

Why is today’s world so concerned with the media and their social impact? Because media influence public opinion, shape attitudes, and prefigure behaviors and reactions. At least for now, the media appear to have won the struggle for influence, becoming the force with the greatest impact on public opinion. They have even achieved something extraordinary: substituting themselves for public opinion, claiming to speak in its name. Any study of the media is therefore implicitly a study of public opinion and of the multiple correlations between media messages and human behavior.

In this new context, communication and communication science—particularly the ability to win an audience for a project or option—become fundamental. The ingenuity with which a strategy is presented is as important as the strategy's intrinsic value. Again, this equivalence is not necessarily desirable, but it is a defining feature of modern evolution.

One of the most recent developments in communication studies is the shift in emphasis from the message and its intrinsic value to reception and the audience's willingness to accept it. In other words, the message does not reside solely in the text or in the public address itself; it is the result of an interaction, a negotiation between sender and receiver. A message, no matter how well constructed, must respond to concerns and, above all, offer solutions to problems that preoccupy individuals and groups to have real resonance.

Undoubtedly, the public possesses a form of "media competence," developed through years of exposure to mass communication. Communication is increasingly becoming a profession—and one of the most demanding—because it exists at the intersection of distinct fields such as sociology, psychology, and linguistics. As a research domain, it draws on and integrates advances from these fields, while also rethinking them within a specific social and psychological context.

However, individuals can connect media messages with other information they have received or with direct experiences, and may develop doubts, especially when essential information is withheld. For example, in the context of national gas reserves, the decline in industrial consumers since 1990, and the fact that in other resource-poor countries energy prices are lower, one might logically expect energy and fuel prices in Romania to decrease. The withholding or concealment of important information on this topic can be seen as a "manipulation of public opinion," aimed at preventing protests or public reactions to economic measures.

Given its roles in shaping, influencing, and potentially manipulating public opinion, the press clearly represents a power within the state. Political or judicial decisions have often been influenced by information appearing in the press. This is not a comfortable situation for the media, as they must navigate increasing political, economic, and social pressures that, cumulatively, may undermine their effectiveness. To act effectively, the press must be independent—both nationally and internationally. Absolute objectivity is impossible, as the press is made up of individuals who may be objective depending on the topic, the situation, their involvement, political sympathies, cultural background, and professional experience.

Moreover, editorial independence and profitability cannot be fully preserved in a market economy. Newspapers, magazines, and broadcasts are consumed according to various factors: culture, education, and social status. One cannot expect an unemployed person or someone with substantial financial means but limited education to purchase cultural magazines or follow educational programs. Such individuals are more likely to seek entertainment-oriented media, which often provide low-quality or even degrading informational content. Consequently, high-quality educational media may be inaccessible to those who are interested but lack financial resources, as well as to those who need them to improve their educational level but lack the necessary cultural background.

Methods

To assess how these measures are reflected in practice, how well known they are, and the current state of the media sector, I conducted a research study between September 2025 and January 2026 among media institutions in Argeş County. In the local media landscape, we

find 3 daily newspapers, 4 weekly publications, 21 news websites, 5 TV stations, 13 national correspondents and 4 freelancers.

Results and discussion

In what context do you place media organizations?

- profit-generating investments
- the fourth estate
- organizations with a particular specificity
- organizations operating on a free and competitive market
- organizations created for reasons other than economic ones

Most respondents (40.2%) placed the media among profit-generating investments in three forms: financial gain, influence, and power. Another 33.6% viewed them as the fourth estate, 21.5% saw them as organizations with a particular specificity, only 2.8% considered them organizations operating on a free and competitive market, and 1.9% believed they were created for reasons other than economic ones.

Are you familiar with any European regulations regarding the media?

Most respondents (43%) believe they are familiar with such regulations to a great extent, 29.9% to a very great extent, 20.6% to some extent, 2.8% to a small extent, and 3.7% to a very small extent.

Is profit emphasized within media organizations?

Most respondents (32.7%) believe that profit is emphasized to a very great extent; 23.4% to a great extent, 19.6% to some extent, 11.2% to a small extent, and 13.1% to a very small extent.

Do you have a strategy in your organization for combating disinformation?

- a. yes
- b. somewhat
- c. we have certain objectives
- d. we adapt to situations
- e. no

Most respondents (30.8%) believe that if they have certain editorial objectives, they can speak of a strategy to combat disinformation; 35.5% somewhat have such a strategy, focused on presenting the truth; 17.8% clearly have one; 8.4% adapt to situations; and 7.5% responded negatively.

What are the main problems the press is currently facing?

- a. lack of specialized personnel
- b. lack of technical equipment
- c. unfair competition
- d. the expansion of social media
- e. expenses

Most respondents (27.1%) complained about the expansion of social media, 20.6% about expenses that create difficulties within the organization, 14% about unfair competition, 15% about technical equipment, and 23.4% about the lack of specialized personnel aligned with current societal expectations.

Do technological changes have an impact on your organization?

Most respondents (47.7%) acknowledged that technological changes influence the activity of media institutions to a very great extent, 32.7% to a great extent, 13.1% to some extent, 4.7% to a small extent, and only 1.9% to a very small extent.

Do you believe there is a need to rethink how media organizations operate?

Most respondents (43.9%) believe that a profound change is mostly needed in media organizations, as the media product is unique and employees have a special status. Another 22.4% believe this to a very great extent, 20.6% to some extent, 9.3% to a small extent, and 3.7% to a very small extent.

Conclusions

At the European level, regulatory measures increasingly aim to strengthen transparency, protect media pluralism, and counter disinformation, reflecting a broader commitment to safeguarding democratic processes. However, the current situation of the press shows that these measures operate in a complex and rapidly evolving environment. Media organizations face significant pressures—from technological change and the dominance of social media to financial constraints, competition, and the need for specialized personnel. Although many professionals are aware of European regulations and acknowledge their importance, the sector still struggles with structural vulnerabilities and a strong emphasis on profit, which can undermine editorial independence. Overall, the findings suggest that while European initiatives provide an essential framework for protecting media integrity, a deeper rethinking of how media organization function is necessary to ensure resilience, credibility, and public trust in an increasingly digital and competitive landscape.

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