

Media Pluralism in Malta

A Test Implementation of the Media Pluralism Monitor 2015



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About the project

The Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) is a research tool that was designed to identify potential risks to media pluralism in the Member States of the European Union. This narrative report has been produced in the framework of the second pilot test implementation of the MPM, carried out in 2015. The implementation was conducted in 19 EU Member States with the support of a grant awarded by the European Union to the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom ([CMPF](#)) at the European University Institute.

The Monitor's methodology is based on research carried out by national country teams in the 19 countries, except for Malta where the data collection was carried out centrally by the CMPF team. The research is based on a standardised questionnaire and apposite guidelines that were developed by the CMPF. Moreover, to ensure accurate and reliable findings, a group of national experts in each country reviewed the answers to particularly sensitive questions (see Annexe I for the list of experts).

Risks for media pluralism are examined in four main thematic domains which are considered to capture the main areas of risk for media pluralism and media freedom: Basic Protection, Market Plurality, Political Independence and Social Inclusiveness. The results are based on the assessment of a number of indicators for each thematic area. The Basic Protection domain consists of four indicators, Market Plurality has three, while Political Independence and Social Inclusiveness each contain six indicators.

Basic Protection	Market Plurality	Political Independence	Social Inclusiveness
Protection of freedom of expression	Transparency of media ownership	Political bias in the media	Access to media for different social and cultural groups, and local communities
Protection of right to information	Concentration of media ownership	Politicisation of control over media outlets	Availability of media platforms for community media
Journalistic profession, standards and protection	Concentration of cross-media ownership	Politicisation of control over media distribution networks	Access to media for the physically challenged people
Independence of national authority(ies)		State advertising	Centralisation of the media system
		Independence of PSM governance and funding	Universal coverage of the PSM and the Internet
		Independence of news agencies	Media literacy

The results for each domain and indicator are presented on a scale from negligible to 100%, negligible risk being the lowest, and 100% risk being the highest score. Scores between negligible and 33% are considered low risk, 34 to 66% are medium risk, while those between 67 and 100% are high risk.

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Disclaimer: The content of the report does not necessarily reflect the views of the EC, but represents the views of the author who was carrying out the data collection.

1. Introduction

Malta joined the European Union in 2004 and is the smallest Member State in terms of both its geography and demography (Aquilina 2014). The country has a dual broadcasting system with the public service broadcaster having two television programmes and three radio stations. It is also the only country in the EU in which the two main political parties own their television and radio stations, and they also publish newspapers. Hence, it is a country with the very strong political parallelism that is usually associated with Mediterranean countries (Hallin & Mancini 2004). Audience research shows that 80% of Maltese people watch televisions every day, 60% use the Internet, 56% listen to radio, and only 22% read daily newspapers (European Commission 2014).

The implementation of MPM2015, for Malta, shows low/medium risks for media pluralism. Specifically, a low risk was detected in the areas of Basic Protection and Market Plurality, while a medium level of risk was found in the areas of Political Independence and Social Inclusiveness. With regard to the indicators, ten scored low risk, five medium, and three high risk, with one indicator ('independence of news agencies') being excluded from the analysis since Malta does not have news agencies and the indicator is not applicable to the country's context.

2. Results from the data collection: assessment of the risks to media pluralism

In the Maltese case, risks for media pluralism were detected in the areas of ‘Political Independence’ and ‘Social Inclusiveness’, which have risk levels of 41% and 51% respectively. The area of ‘Market Plurality’ shows the lowest level of risk, 18%, while the risk assessment for ‘Basic Protection’ is only slightly higher, 21%. It should be noted that the medium risk level in ‘Social Inclusiveness’ primarily reflects the fact that a small country, such as Malta, does not guarantee access to media for local communities, and it has almost no local media (except community radios). However, it may be debatable whether a state of this size should have this legislation and these kinds of media, and whether their absence should be considered a risk.

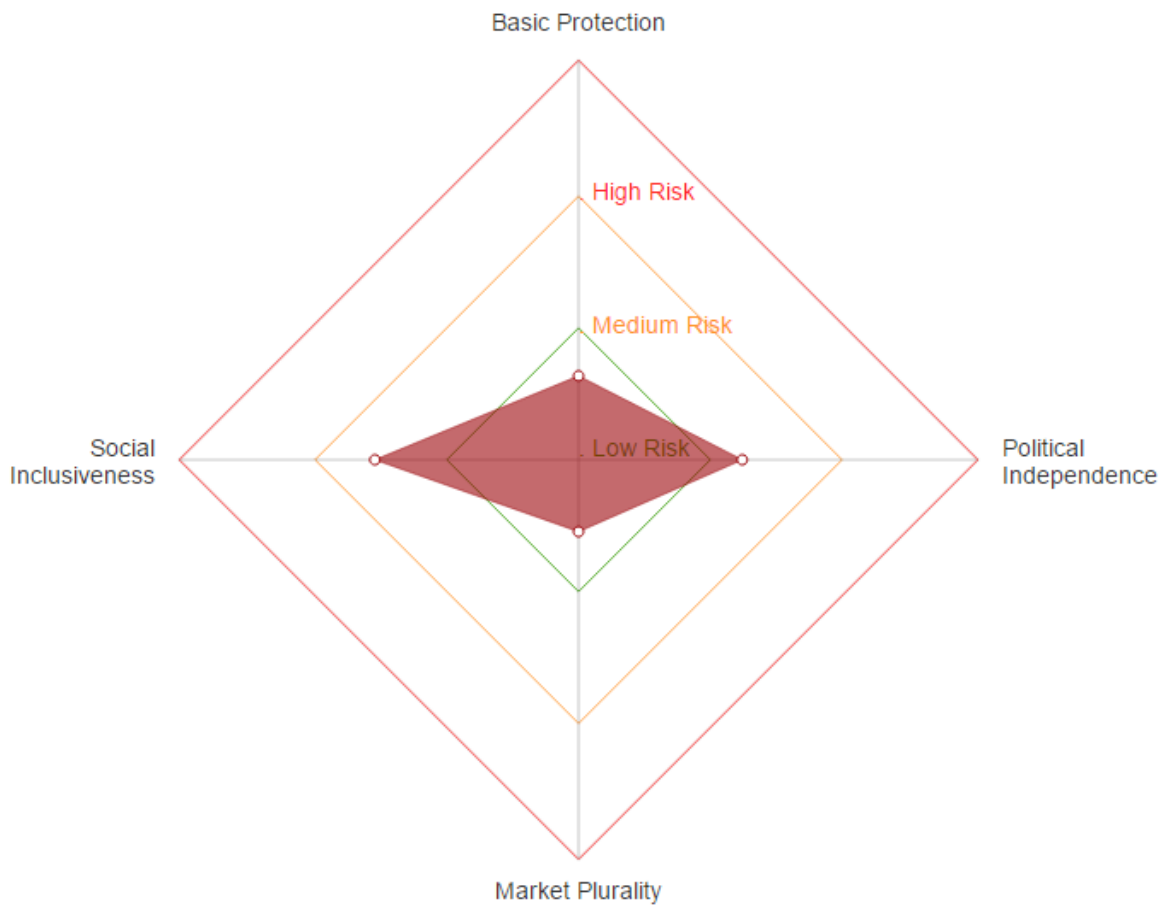


Figure 1 Media Pluralism Monitor 2015 – Malta, results by Risk Domain

2.1 Basic Protection (17% risk - low risk)

The Basic Protection indicators represent the regulatory backbone of the media sector in every contemporary democracy and they measure a number of potential areas of risk, including the existence and effectiveness of the implementation of regulatory safeguards for the freedom of expression and the right to information; the status of journalists in each country, including their protection and ability to work; as well as the independence and effectiveness of the national regulatory bodies, namely, media authorities, competition authorities and communications authorities.

Indicator	Risk
Protection of freedom of expression	14% risk (low)
Protection of right to information	31% risk (low)
Journalistic profession, standards and protection	29% risk (low)
Independence of national authority(ies)	9% risk (low)

All indicators in the area of ‘Basic Protection’ score as low risk, with the indicator on ‘Protection of the right to information’ and on ‘Journalistic profession, standards and protection’ scoring the highest risks amongst them. The study shows that journalists sometimes have problems accessing information from the government, since government officials, at times, withhold information from journalists who are working for oppositional partisan media. An example is the case from September 2015, when Labour’s Transport Minister refused to give an answer during a press conference to a journalist from Net TV, a television station that is owned by the opposition Nationalist party (Martin 2015). Experts claim such cases occur on a regular basis. Furthermore, access to information requests and appeals are not effective in such situations, since the daily media cannot afford to wait for this kind of information because it will become outdated by the time it is revealed. Another problem that journalists face, and which is reflected in the risk assessment for the indicator on ‘journalistic profession, standards and protection’ is poor protection from the owners’ and advertisers’ influences. Journalists and editors working in party media are under obvious influence from the owners, the parties, and there is evidence that economic pressures from advertisers are rising. This is even more problematic since the journalists’ organisation, the Maltese Institute of Journalists, does not represent a majority of the journalists and, according to the opinion of the experts involved in this study, it is not effective in safeguarding editorial independence.

Further risks for media protection stem from heavy government influence in the appointment of the board members of the three authorities that are involved in regulating the media system. However, they seem to be independent in practice, and their decisions are deemed to be taken in the interest of the public, which is reflected in the low risk assessment for the indicator on ‘independence and effectiveness of national authority’.¹ Freedom of expression is guaranteed in the Constitution, and Malta has ratified the relevant

¹ NB: It needs to be noted that this indicator has been found to be problematic in the 2015 implementation of the Media

conventions which guarantee freedom of expression (although with reservations). Experts also claim that, in practise, there is no evidence of violations of freedom of expression, either online or offline. However, defamation is a criminal offence and some risk is shown in this area, although the overall risk level remains low.

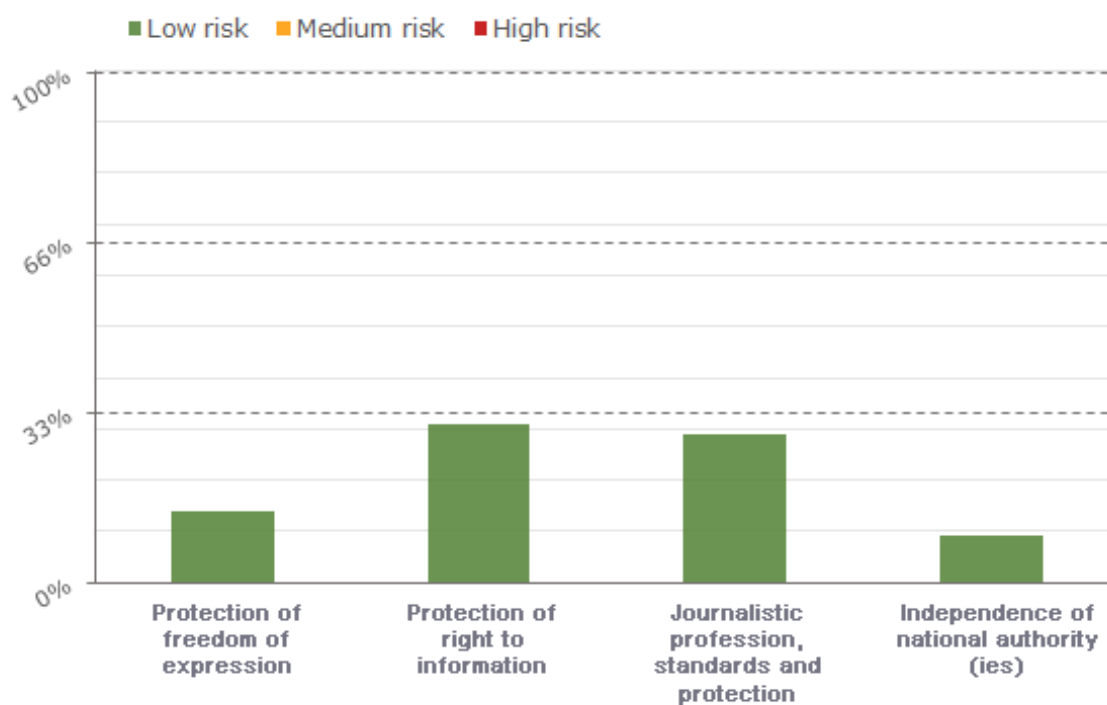


Figure 2 Media Pluralism Monitor 2015 - Malta, Basic Protection Domain, Results by Indicators

Pluralism Monitor. The indicator aimed to combine the risks to the independence and effectiveness of media authorities, competition authorities and communication authorities, but it was found to produce unreliable findings. In particular, despite significant problems with regard to the independence and effectiveness of some of the authorities in many of the countries, the indicator failed to pick up on such risks and tended to produce an overall low level of risk for all countries. This indicator will be revised in future versions of the MPM.

2.2 Market Plurality (18% risk - low risk)

The Market Plurality indicators examine the existence and effectiveness of the implementation of transparency and disclosure provisions with regard to media ownership. In addition, they assess the regulatory safeguards against the high concentration of media ownership and control in the different media, within a media market, as well as cross-ownership concentration within the media sector.

Indicator	Risk
Transparency of media ownership	negligible risk (low)
Concentration of media ownership	54% risk (medium)
Concentration of cross-media ownership	negligible risk (low)

Given that small markets are usually concentrated, it is perhaps surprising that Malta scores low risk with regard to media concentration. The data shows that Malta has highly concentrated markets, since the Top4 media owners in the major media sectors have more than 50% of audience shares. However, the legislation regulating horizontal concentration in audiovisual and radio markets, as well as that concerned with preventing mergers which will lead to a higher degree of concentration, and its apparent effectiveness, decrease the risk assessment for the concentration in media ownership, which is the only media concentration indicator that scores medium risk. It should be noted that the print and online media markets are completely unregulated, and no data is collected about either them or their concentration.

The reason why Malta scores low risk in media concentration, despite its concentrated markets, is related to the low risk assessments of the indicators on ‘Transparency in media ownership’ and ‘Concentration of cross-media ownership’, which have a negligible score. Media outlets are required by law to make their ownership structure publicly available and, according to the experts’ opinions, the public is well aware of who owns which media in Malta. Furthermore, as Aquilina notes: ‘The private sector is not known for crossmedia ownership in Malta, apart from the case of the political parties’ (Aquilina 2014, p.22). Indeed, only the two major political parties own a radio and a TV station, as well as a newspaper. There are no media moguls who own multiple media outlets, and there is legislation regulating the issue, so Malta scores low risk for cross-media ownership.

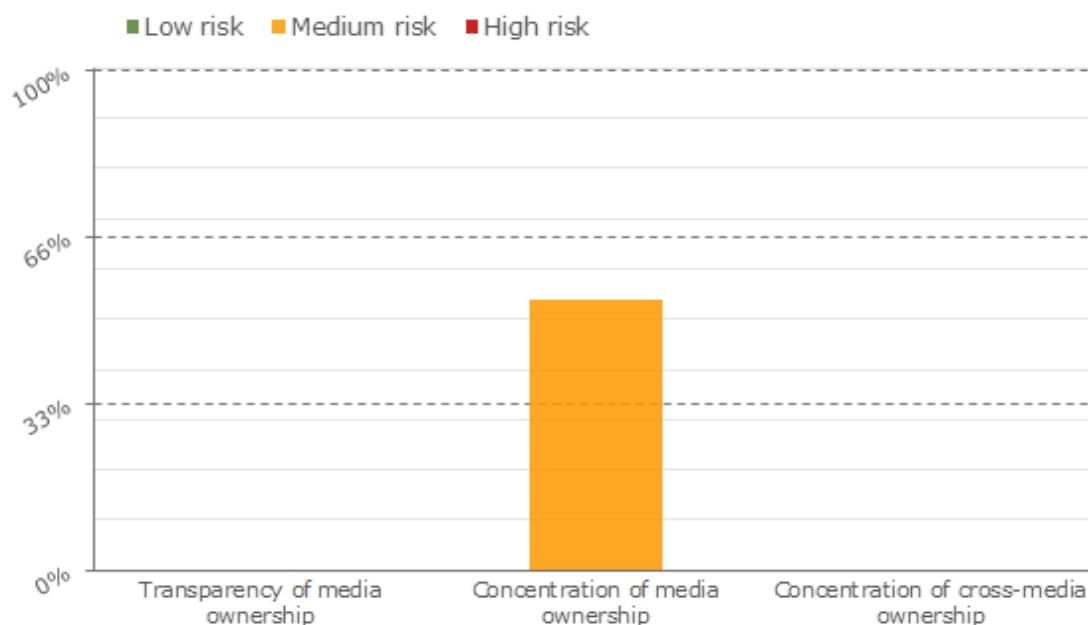


Figure 3 Media Pluralism Monitor 2015 - Malta, Market Plurality Domain, Results by Indicators

2.3 Political Independence (41% risk - medium risk)

The Political Independence indicators assess the existence and effectiveness of the implementation of regulatory safeguards against the biased representation of the political viewpoints in the media, and also the extent of the politicisation over media outlets, media distribution networks and news agencies. Moreover, it examines the influence of the state on the functioning of the media market, with a focus on state advertising and public service media.

Indicator	Risk
Political bias in the media	6% risk (low)
Politicisation of control over media outlets	52% risk (medium)
Politicisation of control over media distribution networks	17% risk (low)
State advertising	83% risk (high)
Independence of PSM governance and funding	47% risk (medium)
Independence of news agencies	Not applicable

Unlike ‘Basic Protection’ and ‘Market Plurality’, ‘Political Independence’ scores medium risk. Three indicators mainly contribute to this: ‘Politicisation of control over media outlets’, ‘State advertising’, and

the ‘Independence of PSM governance and funding’. The indicator on ‘State advertising’ is the only indicator of media independence which scores high risk, mainly because the lack of data about the distribution of state advertising has been declared to be highly problematic by the national experts. In particular, it has been noted that the government uses state advertising in pre-election times as a form of political advertising, and channels this advertising to some, but not all media. With regard to the ‘Politicisation of control over media outlets’, the indicator scores medium risk, due to the fact that there are no self-regulatory measures that stipulate editorial independence in the media. Although Malta has party media, their audience shares are not significant (below 30% combined) (see Broadcasting Authority Malta 2015) and their ownership is transparent, while the major risk in this indicator stems from the lack of guarantees of editorial independence.

The other indicator which scores medium risk is concerned with the ‘Independence of PSM governance and funding’. The analysis has shown that the government has a heavy influence on PSM governance by appointing members of both its Managerial and Editorial boards. The government also partially funds the PSM via a direct grant, which is transparent, but the amount of the grant is decided by the government at its own discretion. Although there is some evidence that pro-government bias exists in PSM reporting, experts argue that its political reporting is not as biased as the opposition parties often argue. This is reflected in a low risk score for the indicator on ‘Political bias in the media’, which also takes into account the fact that objectivity and balance in political reporting is mandated by law and is monitored by the Broadcasting Authority, and that, in electoral campaigns, these principles are mostly respected. Further, experts agree that the strong political parallelism in Malta leads to external pluralism, meaning that all political viewpoints are represented in the media system.

Furthermore, the indicator on ‘Politicisation of control over media distribution networks’ scores low risk, because there is no evidence of the politicisation of distribution networks for radio and television. Finally, the indicator on the ‘Independence of news agencies’ has been coded as being ‘not applicable’ and has been excluded from the analysis since Malta does not have any news agencies.

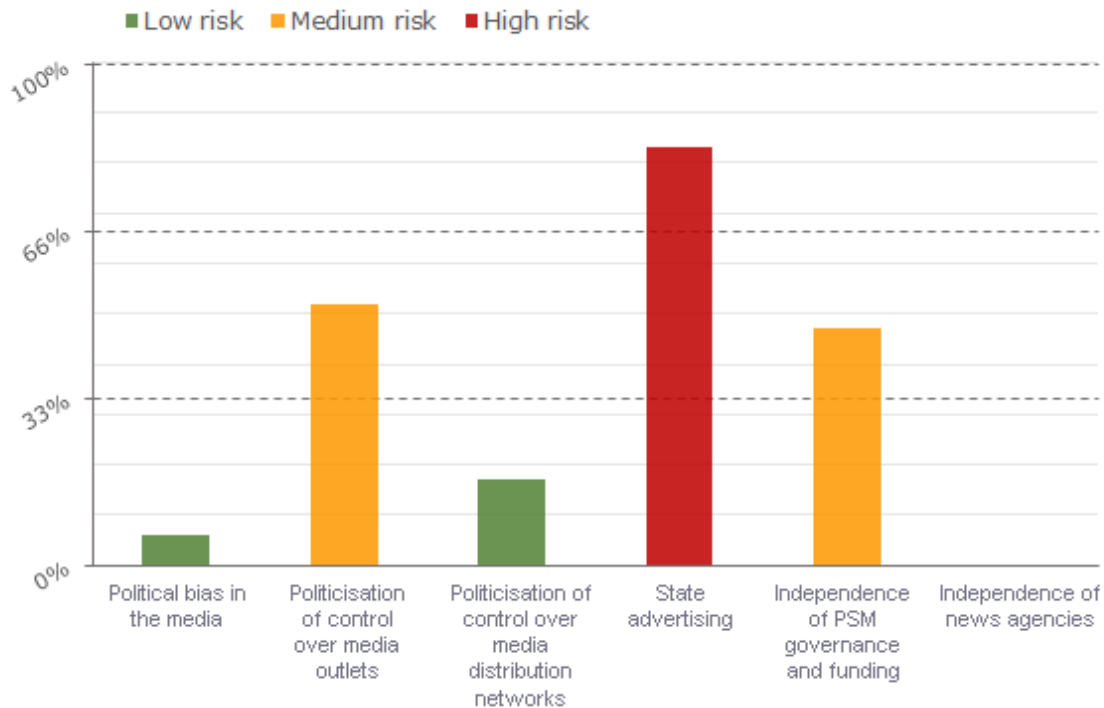


Figure 4: Media Pluralism Monitor 2015 - Malta, Political Independence Domain, Results by Indicators

2.4 Social Inclusiveness (51% risk - medium risk)

The Social Inclusiveness indicators are concerned with access to, and availability of, media for different, and particularly vulnerable, groups in the population.. They assess the regulatory and policy safeguards for access to media by various cultural and social groups, by local communities and by people with disabilities. Moreover, they assess the centralisation of the media system, and the quality of the country's media literacy policy, as well as the digital media skills of the population.

Indicator	Risk
Access to media for different social and cultural groups, and local communities	75% risk (high)
Availability of media platforms for community media	50% risk (medium)
Access to media for physically challenged people	25% risk (low)
Centralisation of the media system	62% risk (medium)
Universal coverage of the PSM and the Internet	25% risk (low)
Media literacy	67% risk (high)

Social Inclusivity is the area which scores the highest risk in Malta, but it still remains within the medium band. There are two indicators that score as high risk ('access to media of different social and cultural groups' and local communities and 'media literacy'), two scoring medium risk ('centralisation of the

media system’ and the ‘availability of media platforms for community media’), and two low risk (‘access to media for physically challenged people’ and ‘universal coverage of the PSM and the Internet’).

The indicator on ‘Access to media for different social and cultural groups and local communities’ scores the highest risk in ‘Social Inclusiveness’, mostly due to the fact that Maltese law does not guarantee access for different social and cultural groups, and local media is almost non-existent (except for community radios). Experts claim that the lack of legislation on the access to media for social and cultural groups is mostly due to the fact that the Maltese population was rather homogenous until recently, hence there was no need for such regulation. However, they also emphasise that, due to immigration, the structure of the Maltese population is changing, and that legislation securing this kind of access should be discussed.

The other indicator scoring high risk is ‘Media literacy’, mostly because there is no state policy on developing media literacy. However, experts point to the fact that media studies are taught in Church schools, and primary schools have modules aimed at the development of students’ digital skills. In addition, the risk assessment also reflects the fact that more than a quarter of the population does not have basic digital skills and does not use the Internet on a weekly basis.

Furthermore, the Maltese media system is highly centralised, since there is hardly any local media (only local radios exist) which leads to the indicator on the ‘Centralisation of the media system’ scoring medium risk. Acknowledging that centralised media systems, in general, pose a risk for media pluralism, it is debatable whether the lack of local media should really be seen as a risk in Malta, given its small size. Another indicator scoring medium risk is the ‘Availability of media platforms for community media’. The score reflects the fact that the law recognises community media as being a distinct group alongside commercial and public media, but it does not guarantee its independence.

Finally, indicators on ‘Access to media for physically challenged people’ and ‘Universal coverage of the PSM and the Internet’ score low risk. News with sound descriptions is available to people with hearing disabilities every day, in prime time on Maltese Public Service Broadcasting, and in the past years political debates and party conferences during electoral campaigns were also accompanied by sign language translations (Broadcasting Authority Malta 2015b), so there is low risk with regard to Access to media for physically challenged people. In addition, the entire population has access to PSM channels, and broadband is available to the rural population, so there is also low risk with regard to ‘Universal coverage of PSM and the Internet’. It should be noted that average download and upload speeds point to medium/high risk, since they are below the EU average.

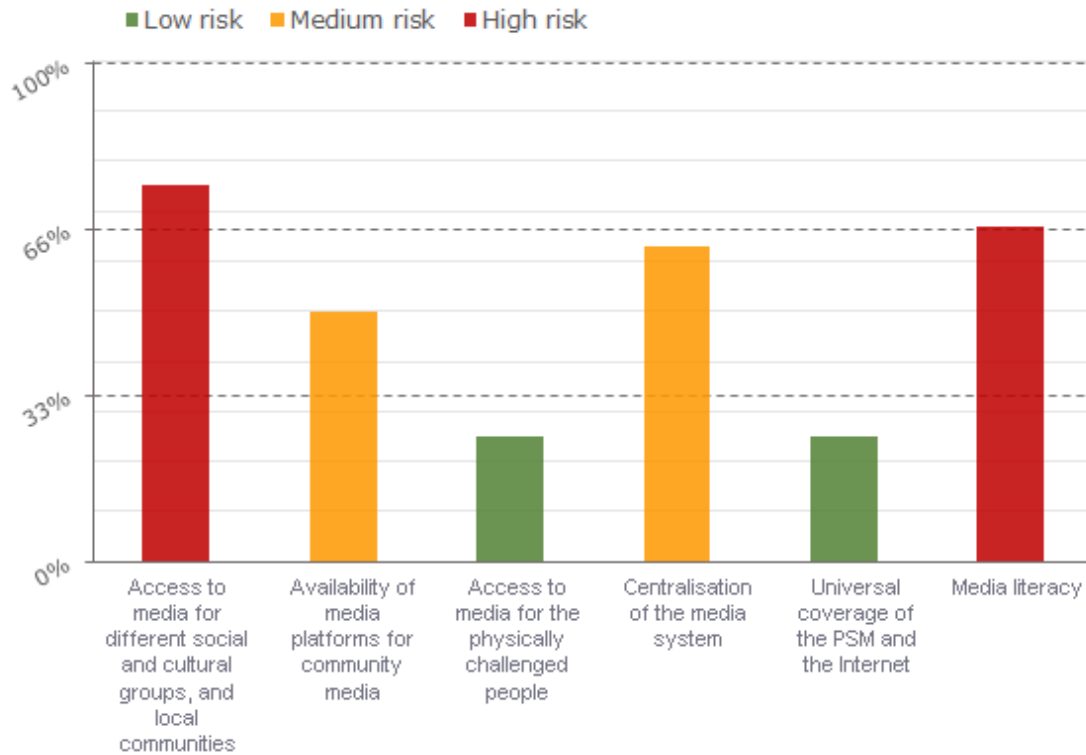


Figure 5 Media Pluralism Monitor 2015 - Malta, Social Inclusiveness Domain, Results by Indicators

3. Conclusions

Based on the findings of the MPM2015, the following issues have been identified by the country team as being more pressing, or as deserving particular attention by policy-makers in order to promote media pluralism and media freedom in the country. .

Based on the results of the MPM2015 for Malta, and the discussions with Maltese stakeholders, one of the most important issues to be addressed in order to foster the development of media pluralism in the country, is the independence of media authorities and the PSM. Experts argue that the government has too much influence over the appointment of the boards of the authorities that are engaged in the regulation of the media system (Broadcasting Authority, Malta Communications Authority, Malta Competition and Consumer Affairs Authority), as well as the board managing the PSM. They suggest that the appointment procedures should change in order to be more democratic and objective, and to minimise the risk of political interference. Furthermore, some experts claim that the existing media regulator, the Broadcasting Authority, is today anachronistic. Its board is composed of members who are appointed by the two major political parties, whose media the board is tasked with monitoring. There also does not appear to be sufficient co-ordination and communication between the three authorities that monitor the media. Consequently, it is suggested that an idea of creating a convergent media regulator should be discussed.

Moreover, given that high risk was identified with regard to access to the media for different social and cultural groups, and that experts argue that this issue is becoming increasingly important due to immigration in recent years, the introduction of legislation which would guarantee access to media by social and cultural groups should be discussed.

Similarly, a high level of risk has been identified in relation to media literacy, and experts agree that this issue should be better addressed than it has been in the past. It was noted that there have been attempts to create a media literacy policy, but nothing concrete has emerged as a result. Hence, state policy should be created which would contain measures that are coherent and updated to meet the latest societal changes.

In addition, some experts have evaluated the state advertising rules and practices as being highly problematic (see Section 2.3). Consequently, the introduction of clear rules and guidelines with regard to state advertising, and/or the distribution of state advertising, would make the system more transparent.

Finally, the Monitor revealed that the digital media are largely unregulated and the information about the media's market share is not being collected. National stakeholders have identified this as being problematic and have called for the introduction of measures which would tackle these issues. Collecting data about the consumption of online media, and the market shares of owners in all media sectors, would help to make more precise assessments of the risks to media pluralism in Malta.

Annexe I. List of national experts who were consulted

Prof Kevin Aquilina

Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Laws

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