

## **RESTORING TRUST IN LOCAL MEDIA THROUGH JOURNALISTIC COLLABORATION: EUROPEAN UNION LEVEL INICIATIVES FOCUSED ON INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM**

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Digital Transformation as applied to the information industry brings about a new scenario for journalistic companies and for the media professionals in them, as well as new ways for audiences to access content (Barland, 2013). This notion goes beyond the merely technological and delves into a new disruptive conception (Guo and Volz, 2019) that involves general challenges such as the need to generate quality content that is credible and reliable in the face of disinformation campaigns, the uncertainty that audiences experience due to their easy access to all kinds of information sources (Lück and Schultz, 2019), the adaptation to the experiences of a new generation of users who are accustomed to receiving decentralised messages often channelled by agents from outside the journalistic sector (Tànase, 2015), or the decline in the levels of trust in news and the tendency to avoid news altogether (Bontcheva and Posetti, 2020).

These challenges became more pronounced from October 2019, with the arrival and expansion of the COVID-19 global pandemic, which gave rise to a twofold drift: on the one hand, it fostered the growth of phenomena such as teleworking, streaming of audiovisual and multimedia content exclusively from home through subscription platforms, the use of social networks as a

way to alleviate individual isolation, or the streamlining of a wide range of processes that can now be done with electronic identification systems (Kunelius, 2020); on the other hand, it has brought about the proliferation of all kinds of hoaxes and false content about the pandemic itself, laying the foundations for a process of global information warfare (Papadopoulou and Maniou, 2021).

Aside from these general problems, more specific ones arise, which can be strategic (Choi, 2016), productive (Salaverría, 2017), narrative (Moloney, 2011), business (Schnell, 2018), cybersecurity-related (Taylor, 2015; Thorsen, 2017), associated with the flow of fake news (Rapp and Salovich, 2018) or focused on accessibility, considering population ageing in the most developed countries (Brown and Hollier, 2015).

Entities such as the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers-WAN/IFRA (2015 and 2022), UNESCO (2020) and the International Federation of Journalists (2021), among others, underline the risks posed by decreasing media credibility for the consolidation of democratic systems and warn about the need to implement mechanisms to reverse this trend, ensure the survival of journalism as a guarantor of freedom of expression, reinforce the levels of public confidence and encourage the establishment of collaborative alliances between information companies, in order to deal with this infodemic environment.

In the specific case of local media, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been decisive to their recent evolution (Zilic and Caks, 2023). Local media's digital transition is of particular concern from both a professional and academic point of view (Galletero and Jerónimo, 2019), as it reinforces economic pressures and hinders business survival (Martin and McCrain, 2019), it favours opening media outlets up to publishing content produced by volunteers and journalism students due to the small staff they have at their disposal (Pantic, 2022), and implies different levels of integration in editorial processes (Jenkins and Jerónimo, 2021) as well as a particular relationship with information sources (Mathisen, 2023). According to the International Press Institute, local news outlets are the most disrupted

sector of the media and in need of urgent assistance, but they also have the greatest potential to form the bedrock for a new, stronger media ecosystem (IPI, 2021).

News deserts, municipalities where there are no local media outlets or where there are no media outlets covering local news on a regular basis (Jerónimo, Ramos and Torre, 2022), present a peculiar situation. After Portugal, Croatia and Turkey started to study this reality (EFJ, 2023), the European Federation of Journalists is now leading a project funded by the European Commission to do a preliminary mapping of all EU countries' news deserts.

In December 2020, these circumstances prompted a communication (COM/2020/784) from the EU Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, about the transformation of the media landscape in recent years. The Commission emphasised the diversity of businesses and players in the media ecosystem and underlined the consolidation of trends such as the remarkable rise of online platforms, the role of social networks in attracting younger audiences, the economic crisis, and the impact of the pandemic on the media industry, the sum of which has endangered the maintenance of a strong media environment to help ensure that citizens have access to plural information and contribute to a sound democratic system (European Commission, 2020).

Researchers (García de Torres and Hermida, 2017; Alfter and Cãdea, 2019) and institutions (Reuters Institute, 2022) have brought attention to the need to foster collaborative journalism, including in areas like investigative journalism (Carson and Farhall, 2018; Coelho and Rodrigues, 2020), which could boost levels of trust in the media industry (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2023) and have the dual purpose of strengthening not only national and transnational information structures (Picard, 2014) but also local ones (Jenkins and Graves, 2019; Wenzel and Crittenden, 2023), and promoting the dissemination of accurate and quality information that consolidates the values upheld by democracy (Costera, 2013).

This kind of journalistic collaboration can be defined as a process of cooperation established between different organisations dedicated to the production of news content, with the strategic objective of overcoming the current shortcomings in the media in areas such as finance, content quality or recovery of social credibility (Parra, 2017). Therefore, it does not refer to the collaboration that takes place between journalists within the same media outlet; it involves different media companies that may belong to the same country or different nations working together to produce investigative journalism (Müller and Wiik, 2023).

Until the beginning of the 21st century, investigative journalism projects relied on print journalism and were led by large journalistic companies, the only ones with the financial ability to take on the enormous economic costs of this type of work (Bradshaw, 2008). However, this approach was challenged by a combination of factors including deep changes in the information industry resulting from digital transformation, the emergence of a new generation of prosumers, the sprawl of social media and a systemic global economic crisis (Leigh, 2012). This context allowed for the emergence and consolidation of collaborative investigative journalism projects based on an external approach to reality, the increase of information sources and the need to strengthen the mechanisms for verifying them, and the growing simultaneity between the occurrence of facts and publishing the story (Parasie, 2015). There are three possible levels of collaboration: content sharing, tactical collaborative production and strategic collective action (Shirky, 2008).

The international dissemination of the Panama Papers investigation that started in April 2016 shows the possibility of this new approach and, in the case at hand, the opportunities that collaborative investigative journalism presents for the local press (Heft, 2019; Jerónimo, Correia and Gradim, 2022), going beyond the classic 5Ws, although including them when necessary, and incorporating aspects such as the past where the story began, the present where that story is revealed and the future that is foreseen as a consequence of the investigation.

## Method

Our research explores how to recover the trust of audiences in local media inside the European Union through journalistic collaboration. To achieve this purpose, it analyses the support that different public institutions and private entities are providing to projects that entail cooperation between journalistic companies and media professionals who work in the local press.

Having established the theoretical framework, we analyse the two main initiatives specifically designed to promote collaborative journalism within the European Union, which include not only media outlets in the countries that belong to the institution but also, on certain occasions, media outlets in other European countries: Journalism Partnerships and Investigative Journalism for Europe. Both initiatives aim to help the wider European news media sector become more sustainable and resilient, thus contributing to trustworthy reporting on current affairs, an informed and inclusive democratic debate, and skills development and employment for news media professionals and journalists.

There are two reasons to consider these two projects as the most important in the field of European collaborative journalism: on the one hand, the financial volume of funding, which amounts to 7,600,000 and 3,750,000 euros in the respective cases of Journalism Partnerships and Investigative Journalism for Europe; and on the other, the number of journalistic companies, media professionals and European countries involved in these initiatives.

Journalism Partnerships is the public action section of Creative Europe (CREA), conceived in 2014 with the goal of boosting the cultural and creative sectors, providing support to artists, professionals and cultural and audiovisual organisations, performing arts, fine arts, publishing, film, television, music, interdisciplinary arts, literature and the video games industry. The second phase of this project, running from 2021 to 2027, calls for specific programmes for the funding of initiatives that establish partnerships and cooperation between media outlets in Europe.

Currently, Journalism Partnerships consists of seven subprogrammes: European Excellence Exchange in Journalism; European Local Cross-Border Investigative Journalism; Media Innovation Europe: Energizing the European Media Ecosystem; European Focus; The Circle: a European Network of European Hubs; Stars4Media; and Pix.T for News & Photojournalism.

The other project under analysis, Investigative Journalism for Europe (IJ4E), is a private initiative that supports cross-border watchdog journalism in the European Union and EU candidate countries by providing grants and other kinds of assistance to teams of journalists or news outlets investigating topics of public interest. It offers two types of grants: bespoke support for freelancers and for any kind of cross-border collaboration.

IJ4E is managed by a consortium led by the International Press Institute (IPI), a global network of editors, media executives and leading journalists for press freedom, in collaboration with the European Journalism Centre (EJC), which focuses on building resilience into journalism through grants, events, training and media development, and the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), which promotes media freedom by monitoring violations, providing practical support and engaging diverse stakeholders across Europe. It is supported by the European Commission as a Preparatory Action as well as by co-funding from the Open Society Foundation, Fritt Ord Foundation, Fondation Nicolas Puech and the City of Leipzig. The scrupulous independence of the initiative is guaranteed through the implementation of a set of failsafes preventing donor influence over project selection or editorial approaches.

This promotion of journalistic and media cooperation from an institutional perspective is not only novel, it transcends mere informative action and addresses the strengthening of the democratic system, by supporting the generation of deep changes in working processes and in systemic structures that have to take place in the medium and long term. It can be an answer for dealing with circumstances such as the trivialisation of news and its

anaesthetic effect on public opinion (Brottman, 2005), the exacerbation of the search for short-term profit (Holzer and Ondrus, 2011), disintermediation directly linked to audience fragmentation (Lee-Wright, Philips and Witschge, 2013) and the disinformation spreading that is now part of the tactics included in the so-called hybrid wars (Gaber and Fisher, 2022) and particularly affects local media (Jerónimo and Sánchez-Esparza, 2022; Rivas-de-Roca, Morais and Jerónimo, 2022; Torre and Jerónimo, 2023).

A total of eight actions were identified which are aimed at restoring trust in the local media by promoting journalistic collaboration: six of these correspond to Journalism Partnerships and two to Investigative Journalism for Europe. In the first group, there are four actions included in Stars4Media News (“Heare”, “Small independent local/regional newsroom cooperating cross border”, “Solution Capitales” and “Sur”) and two that refer to European Local Cross-Border Investigative Journalism (“The Invisible Man” and “War through the eyes of children”). The last two, contained in Investigative Journalism for Europe, are “Forests for Fear” and “Corruption in the Danube Delta.”

In order to examine these eight actions we have created a quantitative fact sheet entitled *Local journalistic collaboration general data*, and we structured it into six sections: cross-border investigative journalism programme (and its public or private nature), name of the local journalistic collaboration, starting year, countries involved, participating media outlets and subject matters addressed.

The eight identified actions were then studied individually with the help of an analysis sheet that referred to the different journalistic pieces each action generated, organised in four sections: publication media outlet, headline, language and publication date. Each table is followed by the discussion of what this kind of journalistic collaboration can do towards restoring trust in local media.

## Results and discussion

### General data

Table number 1. Local journalistic collaboration general data

Cross-border investigative journalism program (and nature)	Name of the local journalistic collaboration	Starting year	Countries involved	Media participating	Subject matters
European Local Cross-Border Investigative Journalism (public nature)	The Invisible Man	2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Belarus</li> <li>Lithuania</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Belarusian Investigative Center</li> <li>Tiriamosios žurnalistikos centras "Siena"</li> </ul>	Corruption
European Local Cross-Border Investigative Journalism (public nature)	War through the Eyes of Children	2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Georgia</li> <li>Ucrania</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Radio Atinati</li> <li>Magazine JADU</li> </ul>	Migration, Refugees and Asylum
Stars4Media (public nature)	Heare	2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Germany</li> <li>Belgium</li> <li>Netherlands</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are We Europe</li> <li>Novasaga</li> <li>Bear Radio</li> </ul>	Podcasts, Social media, Content curation, Local media
Stars4Media (public nature)	Small independent local/regional newsroom cooperating cross border	2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Czech Republic</li> <li>Belgium</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Novinářský klub Jindřicha Opava</li> <li>Misflits</li> </ul>	Newsroom creation, Development of a new business model considering membership and crowdsourcing models
Stars4Media (public nature)	Solution Captales	2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>France</li> <li>Belgium</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cafébabel</li> <li>BXI</li> </ul>	Refugees, Urban Farms, ex-prisoners reintegration initiatives
Stars4Media (public nature)	Sur	2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spain</li> <li>Sweden</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocento Group</li> <li>Cruncho</li> </ul>	Hypelocal tourism initiative using Artificial Intelligence
Investigative Journalism for Europe (private nature)	Corruption in the Danube Delta	2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Belgium</li> <li>Germany</li> <li>Netherlands</li> <li>Romania</li> <li>United Kingdom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adevărul</li> <li>Constanta TV</li> <li>Epoch Times</li> <li>Romania Europa FM</li> <li>Romania G4 Media</li> <li>Hot News</li> <li>Info Sud-Est</li> <li>NRC Handelsblad</li> <li>Romania Insider</li> <li>Städteutsche Zeitung</li> <li>Ziua de Constanta</li> <li>Balkan Insight</li> <li>Delfi Lithuania</li> </ul>	Climate Change, Corruption
Investigative Journalism for Europe (private nature)	Forests of Fear	2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Belarus</li> <li>Czech Republic</li> <li>Greece</li> <li>Italy</li> <li>Lithuania</li> <li>Poland</li> <li>Serbia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ziua de Constanta</li> <li>Balkan Insight</li> <li>Delfi Lithuania</li> </ul>	Migration, Refugees and Asylum

There is a mix of media outlets across 18 countries, media belonging to classic information enterprises (Adevărul, BX1, Epoch Times Romania, Europa FM Romania, G4 Media, NRC Handelsblad, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Vocento Group or Ziua de Constanta), digital native media companies (Balkan Insight, Cafébabel, Constanta TV, Delfi Lithuania, Hot News, Info Sud-Est, Magazine JADU, Misflits, Radio Atinati or Romania Insider), content producers (Bear Radio, Novasaga), non-governmental organisations and cross-border networks of journalists (Are We Europe, Belarusian Investigative Center or Novinářský klub Jindřicha Oopera) and technology developers (Cruncho, Tiriamosios žurnalistikos centras “Siena”) among those involved in the funded initiatives.

The various cross-border collaborations that have been established involve not only local media outlets but also national media companies, which are used by the former as a strategic loudspeaker to increase the levels of dissemination of the issues raised and grow their credibility with local public opinion.

There is a notable heterogeneity in the topics covered in the field of investigative journalism, although environment, health, migration, money laundering, political corruption and refugees are more frequent themes. This variety is also present in the genres and formats, which range from in-depth multimedia reporting to podcasts.

A significant amount of the funded projects has to do not with specific narrative proposals but with the definition of business models that guarantee the strengthening of trust in the local press in the medium term. In this regard one may highlight the cases of “Small independent local/regional newsroom cooperating cross border” and “Sur”, both generated by Stars4Media, an innovation exchange programme co-funded by the European Commission aiming at facilitating cooperation between media professionals to accelerate media innovation and cross-border cooperation and supported by partners like the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Europe’s Media Lab, the European Federation of Journalists and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers.

## *The Invisible Man*

Table number 2. Information about to The Invisible Man, generated by the European Local Cross-Border Investigative Journalism programme

Publication media	Head line	Language	Publication date
Belorussian Investigative Center BIC	How a secret Lithuanian partner helped Chyzh make billions in a solvent scheme	English	November 2022
Siena	Belarusian Opposition Demands Justice after OCCRP Members Uncovered a Multi-billion Scheme	Lithuanian	November 13, 2022
Alfa TV	Misteris milijardas. Tarptautinis žurnalistas tyrimas	Lithuanian	November 13, 2022
LRT	Misteris milijardas. Tarptautinis žurnalistas tyrimas	Lithuanian	November 13, 2022
HotNews	Misteris milijardas: V.Tomaševskis, A.Pukelis, A.Lukašenkos piniginės ir slaptas Lietuvos verslo lyderis	Lithuanian	November 13, 2022
OCCRP	Belarusian Opposition Demands Action after OCCRP Uncovers Multi-billion Scheme	English	November 22, 2022
TVP World	International journalistic investigation "Mr. Billion"	English	November 28, 2022

In this investigative report it comes to light that businessmen Yury Chyzh and Vitold Tomaševskij received funding, benefits and exclusive opportunities from the Belarusian government. Chyzh and Tomaševskij gained Lukashenko's trust and received preferential access to the oil industry and the state awarded companies of Yury Chyzh with lucrative exclusive deals. The project uncovered a network of companies covertly connected to the Belarusian regime that generated several billion dollars in sales in 2011 and 2012, when the Lukashenko regime was allegedly evading fees.

The initiative is led by Belarusian and Lithuanian organizations Belorussian Investigative Center (BIC) and Siena, and carried out by media journalists Stanislau Ivashkevich, a Belarusian investigative journalist at Belsat TV, chairman of the only investigative centre in his country, ESnaUra! z.s, and Šarūnas Černiauskas, who leads Siena, the first Lithuanian non-profit organization dedicated entirely to investigative reporting. The Invisible Man report has been supported by Journalismfund.eu for a total amount of 8,000 euros. Besides publishing well substantiated online and audiovisual reporting featuring financial documents in Belorussian Investigative Center BIC, Siena, Alfa TV, LRT, Hot News and OCCRP, journalist Šarūnas

Černiauskas was interviewed by TVP World. The results were published in English and Lithuanian.

The journalistic investigation is based in exhaustive economic research, using public records, reports, anonymous sources and data leaked by the Belarusian cyber partisans, a group of anonymous dissidents. The journalists explain how the empire was forged over the years: the companies, the profitable economic benefits estimated in billions of euros and the substantial investments in real estate outside Belarus. While Tomaševskij bought villas and apartments in Europe, the investigation also reveals how, despite being convicted of tax evasion twice, Chyzh uses his family members, who are listed as owners of the assets, as a cover for his business dealings.

### *War through the Eyes of Children*

Table number 3. Information about War through the Eyes of Children, generated by European Local Cross-Border Investigative Journalism programme

<b>Publication media</b>	<b>Head line</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Publication date</b>
Radio Atinati	War through the eyes of children. The Ukrainian-Georgian Experience	The Georgian	September 27, 2022
Magazine JADU	Internally Displaced Persons In The Carpathians	Ukrainian	October 2022
Perspective Daily	Wie geflüchtete Kinder in den Bergen ein Stück Normalität finden - Perspective Daily 09 December 2022	German	December 9, 2022

The reports published in the scope of this project focus on the children of war. In the published pieces, we hear the voices of exiled children recounting their war experiences, a denouncement of the psychological damage of war and the displacement it causes, the disruption in the lives of children, the indelible traces in their memories as a result of post-traumatic stress, the loss of home and roots.

This collaborative project was funded by Journalismfund Europe, an independent Brussels-based non-profit organization founded in 1998, aiming to facilitate investigative cross-border independent journalism and strengthen democracy in Europe. The initiative was led by media outlets from Georgia

(Radio Atinati) and Ukraine (Magazine JADU) and received a subsidy of 2,460 euros allocated on 28/07/2022. Two journalists were involved in this project: Salome Partsvania, who has been working for radio “Atinati” for 9 years, and Romaniia Gorbach, a Ukrainian journalist and media coach who has worked on the radio and in print/online media.

In the “War through the eyes of the Children” investigative story, four adults recall their experiences of fleeing as refugees during the war in Abkhazia, 30 years later. It is a sentimental and also a physical journey in which, through photographs and videos, the now adults share their memories, their fear of war and their years of exile. The story “Internally Displaced Persons In The Carpathians,” published in Magazine JADU and Perspective Daily, gives voice to the internal refugees from the Ukrainian war who have arrived in the Lviv region. The report shows, through the stories of four families, the human face of displacement, of those who welcome and those who flee seeking refuge. The stories are told in German, Georgian and Ukrainian through digital multimedia storytelling combining text, audio, video and pictures.

### ***Heare***

Content curation in a virtual community where participants can discover new podcasts according to their location and topics of interest. It was this proposal that brought together the German podcast producer Bear Radio, the Are We Europe foundation from the Netherlands and Novasaga from Belgium to develop Heare.

Heare is a virtual community where podcasts are mapped according to their location and themes. The project is in beta and started with 75 people participating as beta testers.

Heare’s website states the date when the application will be open to everyone. Until now there are no pieces of information analysis in this article, but there is a link with a form for those interested in becoming testers.

### ***Small independent local/regional newsroom cooperating cross border***

Table number 4. Information about Small independent local/regional newsroom cooperating cross border generated by the Stars4Media programme

<b>Publication media</b>	<b>Headline</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Publication date</b>
Novinářský klub Jindřicha Oppera	Stars4Media	Czech	September 15, 2021
Misflits	Stars4Media: Innovatie, partnerschap en cross-border	Dutch	February 9, 2022
Misflits	Híttegolf geïnspireerd door Nieuwsworstijnen	Dutch	July 20, 2022

Thanks to a membership-based sustainable financing model, misflits.eu aims to regain reader trust and build a bridge between European journalists, telling in-depth local stories so we can all learn from each other. And if you want to join the mission, Novinářský Klub Jindřicha Oppera and Misflits have put together a handbook with a step-by-step explanation on how to turn your passion for writing into a source of revenue.

### ***Solution Capitales***

Table number 5. Information about to Solution Capitales generated by the Stars4Media programme

<b>Publication media</b>	<b>Headline</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Publication date</b>
BX1, Cafébabel	Immigration and refugee	France	September 26, 2021
BX1, Cafébabel	Urban farms in France	France	October 31, 2021
BX1, Cafébabel	Reintegration of prisoners in Belgium	France	November 28, 2021
BX1, Cafébabel	Special needs	France	December 19, 2021
BX1, Cafébabel	Education	France	February 27, 2022
BX1, Cafébabel	Urban mobility in Belgium	France	March 27, 2022

Discussing social issues on the European agenda, such as refugees, urban farming, social inclusion and other issues, based on solutions journalism

(SoJo), which focuses on initiatives to solve problems and not on the problems themselves. This was the objective of the Solutions Capitales project, a partnership between television station BX1 from Belgium and the multilingual news portal Cafébabel from France.

The partnership, financed by the Stars4Media programme, resulted in a series with six episodes that aired between September 2021 and March 2022. The programme was presented by journalists Maria Bemba and Safouane Abdessalem, both from Cafébabel, in partnership with the production team from BX1. It was broadcast on the Belgian TV channel and on the broadcaster's website. In May 2022, Solution Capitales was awarded the Trust, Journalism and Participation award by Stars4Media. There haven't been any new episodes since then.

Although the program proposes a discussion about local issues in France and Belgium, with a look at what also happens in other European countries, and the Cafébabel portal intends to be a multilingual communication outlet, the six episodes of Solution Capitales were produced only in French, with no option for subtitles in other languages.

## **Sur**

Diario Sur is one of the main Spanish local media outlets, headquartered in Málaga. This initiative, funded by Stars4Media, is an artificial intelligence (AI) powered city guide to the South of Spain, which combines a live search widget and events services collected from trustworthy sources. Through advertisements, affiliate revenue and sponsorships, Cruncho's expertise has helped Vocento create several new sources of revenue: displaying advertising, Ticketmaster event fees and, in the future, events published by Sur users.

The AI city guide offers information on leisure plans, restaurants and hotels collected from reliable resources (Booking.com, etc) in three languages (English, Spanish, and German); meanwhile the live search widget allows users to know what is happening around them and the event

platform lets them upload their own events, which enriches the platform with hyperlocal entertainment content.

### ***Corruption in the Danube Delta***

Table number 6. Information about Corruption in the Danube Delta generated by Investigative Journalism for Europe programme

Publication media	Headline	Language	Publication date
Süddeutsche Zeitung	Im Sumpf: Eu-Geld in Rumänien: Geheimnisse im Donaudelta	German	February 26, 2021
Info Sud-Est	INVESTIGAȚIE Unde a ajuns miliardul de euro de la UE pentru Delta Dunării. Oamenii care controlează banii	Romanian	February 27, 2021
Europa FM Romania	Investigație Info Sud Est: Cum a rămas Delta fără ajutorul de un miliard de euro de la UE	Romanian	February 27, 2021
G4 Media	INVESTIGAȚIE Unde a ajuns miliardul de euro de la UE pentru Delta Dunării. Oamenii care controlează banii	Romanian	February 27, 2021
HotNews	Unde a ajuns miliardul de euro de la UE pentru Delta Dunării. Oamenii care controlează banii	Romanian	February 27, 2021
Ziua de Constanta	Unde a ajuns miliardul de euro de la UE pentru Delta Dunării. Oamenii care controlează banii	Romanian	February 27, 2021
Adevarul	Unde au ajuns banii de la UE pentru Delta Dunării. Cine controlează miliardul de euro	Romanian	February 28, 2021
Constante TV	Investigație ISE: Unde a ajuns miliardul de euro de la UE pentru Delta Dunării	Romanian	February 28, 2021
Epoch Romania	INVESTIGAȚIE Unde a ajuns MILIARDUL de EURO de la UE pentru Delta Dunării. Oamenii care controlează banii	Romanian	February 28, 2021
Romania Insider	Investigation shows Romania misused EUR 1 bln EU money for Danube Delta	English	March 1, 2021
Info Sud-Est	INVESTIGATION: Where did the European Union's billion euros for the Danube Delta actually go?	English	March 5, 2021
G4 Media	INVESTIGATION: Where did the European Union's billion euros for the Danube Delta actually go?	English	March 6, 2021
G4 Media	Cum s-au scurs peste 100 de milioane de euro destinați Deltei Dunării către sute de firme din țară, cu puncte de lucru deschise în grădini și hale părăsite din Tulcea	Romanian	April 24, 2021
NRC Handelsblad	1,1 miljard aan EU-geld niet besteed aan Donaudelta	Dutch	May 9, 2021
NRC Handelsblad	Hoe de EU-miljoenen voor de Donaudelta weglekten	Dutch	May 9, 2021
G4 Media	EXCLUSIV Comisia Europeană a intrerupt plățile din III Delta Dunării, programul european de peste 1 miliard de euro/ Autoritățile române investighează modul în care au fost cheltuiți banii europeni	Romanian	June 16, 2021
Süddeutsche Zeitung	EU-Gelder für das rumänische Donaudelta eingefroren	German	June 18, 2021
Info Sud-Est	EXCLUSIV: OLAF investighează cum a fost cheltuit miliardul de euro din Delta Dunării/ Comisia Europeană, despre viitorul III din România: "Vom decide bazându-ne pe lecțiile învățate"	Romanian	June 24, 2021

This collaborative project analyses the plunder of 1,000 million euros from European Union development funds that was carried out in the Danube Delta, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It involves entities in Belgium, Germany, Netherlands, Romania and the United Kingdom. Over four months, the cross-border team examined the documentation from over 1,000 tenders, and looked at the wealth declarations of local and national politicians. As a result of the investigation, it was determined that instead of alleviating poverty in this economically depressed region and preserving the unique ecology of Europe's largest wetland, the funds fell under the control of a network of Romanian politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen.

The initiative is led by media outlets from Germany (Süddeutsche Zeitung), Netherlands (NRC Handelsblad) and Romania (Adevarul, Constante TV, Epoch Times Romania, Europa FM Romania, G4 Media, Hot News, Info Sud-Est, Romania Insider and Ziua de Constanta) and has been funded through the Investigation Support Scheme for a total amount of 46,410 euros. The resulting stories, mainly in-depth multimedia reports that combined text, photographs, infographics, podcasts and videos, were published in Romanian, German, Dutch and English.

Due to Corruption in the Danube Delta, the European Union suspended its payments in June 2021 and asked Romanian authorities to investigate the situation. Meanwhile, the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) officially opened an investigation and the team of journalists was invited to present its findings in a special hearing at the European Parliament.

## Forests of Fear

Table number 7. Information about Forests of Fear generated by Investigative Journalism for Europe programme

Publication media	Headline	Language	Publication date
Balkan Insight	Migrants on Polish Border Face Dire Consequences as Belarus and EU Harden Stances	English	November 17, 2021
Balkan Insight	Polish Authorities Intimidate Journalists at Belarus Border	English	November 17, 2021
Balkan Insight	Mohammed's Family: Repeated Pushbacks of Pregnant Woman and her Children	English	November 19, 2021
Balkan Insight	A Kurdish Family: A Nighttime Encounter with Migrants in the Forest	English	November 22, 2021
Balkan Insight	Boushra al-Moallem: Panic Attacks after Three Weeks of Roaming in the Forest	English	December 1, 2021
Balkan Insight	Two Iraqi Young men: Recount the Pushbacks	English	December 2, 2021
Balkan Insight	Balkan Countries Unfazed by Belarus' Import Ban	English	December 8, 2021
Balkan Insight	Hungary Embarrassed as it Admits Issuing EU Visa to Deported Belarus Football Chief	English	December 9, 2021
Balkan Insight	Avin Irfan Zahir: Pregnant Mother of Five Dies from Hypothermia and Acidosis	English	January 29, 2022
Balkan Insight	Ukraine-Russia: There Gone the Neighbourhood	English	February 2, 2022
Balkan Insight	Making Poland's Military Great Again	English	February 8, 2022
Balkan Insight	Selected Sympathy: Poland's Contrasting Treatment of Those Seeking Refuge	English	March 3, 2022
Balkan Insight	Number of Migrants Trying to Enter Poland from Belarus Picks up Again	English	March 22, 2022
Delfi Lithuania	Migrantas apie stovyklų įsigyventas kančias: mėlai grįžčiau namo, bet ten manęs laukia neišvengiamą mirtį	Lithuanian	March 26, 2022
Delfi Lithuania	Minske sukurpto plano ištakos: užtvindyti Lietuvą migrantais ruošta ši gerokai ankščiau nei pasipylė grasinimai	Lithuanian	April 16, 2022
Delfi Lithuania	Lietuvos kova su migrantų antplūdžiu: kontroversiška žingsnį lydėjo ir skandalai, ir propagandinės atakos	Lithuanian	April 16, 2022
Balkan Insight	Bahaddin: Poland Pushes Back to Belarus	English	May 1, 2022
Balkan Insight	Kurdish Activist Whose Life is under Threat Featuring New Hybrid War Front, Poland to Build Walk on Kaliningrad Border	English	November 2, 2022
Balkan Insight	Democracy Digest: Poland Pushed to the Wall Again	English	November 4, 2022
Balkan Insight	Fog of War Thickens on Poland-Russia Border at Kaliningrad	English	November 15, 2022
Balkan Insight	Russian Roulette: EU Dreams of Migrants Now Come Through Moscow	English	December 19, 2022
Balkan Insight	HRW Report: Southeast, Central Europe Backsliding on Human Rights	English	January 12, 2023
Balkan Insight	Held Without Rhyme or Reason: Poland's Detention System for Migrants Labeled a Farce	English	February 1, 2023
Balkan Insight	Vigils Held in Poland after Migrants' Bodies Found at Belarus Border	English	February 28, 2023
Balkan Insight	Polish Forest Full of Fear	English	No date (site: <a href="https://balkaninsight.com/polish-forests/">https://balkaninsight.com/polish-forests/</a> )

This journalistic collaborative project focuses on the border crisis between Belarus and the European Union, which began long before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It includes Belarus, the Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Poland and Serbia. The investigation reveals that thousands of migrants from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere are attempting to cross into the EU from Belarus, which is considered an act of hybrid warfare by countries like Poland and Lithuania, and documents the hardships experienced by asylum seekers: violence, freezing temperatures, or inhumane conditions in camps where people who entered Lithuania or Poland are imprisoned...

The initiative is led by Balkan Insight and Delfi Lithuania. Balkan Insight is part of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), a network of non-governmental organizations founded in 2004 focusing on news and investigative reporting from Southeastern Europe, Delfi Lithuania is one of the three branches of Delfi, a company founded in 1999 that operates in the Baltic Republics and is now owned by the Estonian media and publishing holding Ekspress Grupp.

This project's approach is in-depth multimedia reports, published in English and Lithuanian, combining text, photographs, infographics, podcasts and videos. It also features an interactive site with all kinds of findings including the number of pushbacks the migrants faced, their countries of origin and harrowing accounts of violence, injuries and death. Forests of Fear has been funded through the Investigation Support Scheme for a total amount of 45,200 euros.

## **Conclusions**

The processes of social disintermediation of the information industry and disinformation of public opinion are so far-reaching that they affect not only the credibility of the communication ecosystem, but they also undermine the very principles of democracy. In the face of such circumstances, an increasing number of local cross-border media initiatives, fostered by

institutional authorities and private corporations in order to tackle these challenges, can be highlighted.

Our research suggests that it is easier and more effective to develop cooperation projects between local media outlets when investigating topics that Public Administrations are more concerned with and that audiences show particular interest in (for example, work about the environment, health, migration, money laundering, political corruption or refugees); likewise, collaboration processes are simplified when they take place between local media outlets that operate in countries with common cultures (for instance, Baltic States, Benelux area, Nordic or Mediterranean nations).

A significant portion of the funded projects have to do not with specific narrative proposals but with business models that could strengthen trust in the local press in the medium term. In terms of practical implications for business, collaboration between local media makes it possible to strengthen links with regular audiences by improving the quality levels of content production as well as accessing other population groups that for financial reasons are difficult to reach; it also facilitates the incorporation of freelance journalists into the production structure of these media outlets, providing them with corporate support for their daily activities.

The various cross-border collaborations that have been established involve not only local media but also national media outlets, which are used by the former as a strategic loudspeaker to increase dissemination of the issues and grow their credibility with local public opinion. In terms of practical policy implications, this article lays the groundwork for establishing a European map that distinguishes areas for encouraging journalistic collaboration between local media, and also certain grey areas where public authorities should adopt measures to encourage collaborative journalism in order to promote a culture of trust in the information industry. A total of 18 countries have been identified as being involved in such initiatives aimed at boosting levels of trust in the local press.

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