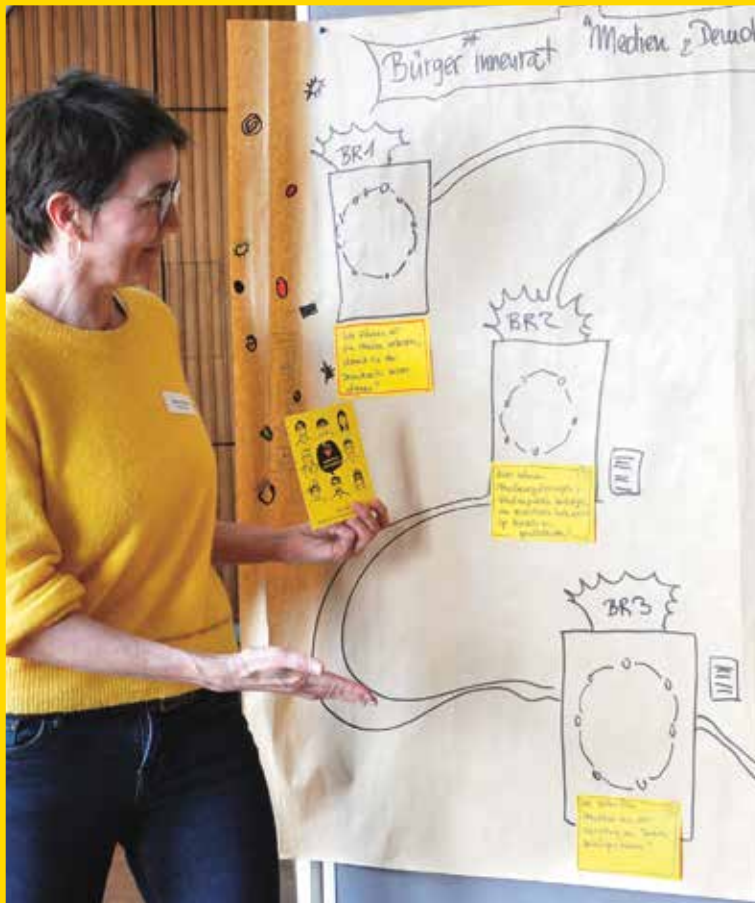WE ❤️ MEDIA & DEMOCRACY

The Austrian Citizens' Parliament on Media and Democracy

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Facilitator Ruth Picker shows the path from the first to the fourth session.

The path through the Citizens' Parliament

The Austrian Citizens' Parliament on Media and Democracy met in Vienna from March to May 2025. On four Saturdays, 20 citizens discussed their demands on the media and adopted 50 resolutions aimed at strengthening the media's role in fostering a thriving democracy.

· Sat, 22 March 2025
  Introduction: Media and democracy
· Sat, 5 April 2025
  Media systems and media regulation
· Sat, 26 April 2025
  Participation in and through the media
· Sat, 17 May 2025
  Representation in the media

Each session began with introductory contributions from experts from research and the media, on the basis of which citizens identified key issues. From session 2 onwards, citizens drafted resolutions in four committees, which were then jointly adopted in plenary.
The resolutions appeal to decision-makers in politics, the media, and education to support diverse media that promote democracy.

The organising team

The Austrian Citizens' Parliament on Media and Democracy was organised by the Community Media Institute COMMIT in Vienna as part of the EU-funded research project MeDeMAP. Financial support was provided by the ERSTE Foundation, the European Capital of Democracy Vienna 2024/25, the Austrian Regulatory Authority for Broadcasting and Telecommunications (RTR), and the European Civic Forum. The Vienna Adult Education Centre hosted the meetings.
COMMIT project team: **Helmut Peissl** (coordination), **Laurence Monnot** (organisation and documentation), **Andrea Sedlaczek** (communication and research), **Laura Derma** (research assistant)
Facilitation: **Ruth Picker Consulting** (www.ruthpicker.at; Ruth Picker, Markus Götsch; Rupert Roniger)
Graphic recording: **Daniela Ekl** and **Verena Hochleitner**

The advisory board

As an honorary advisory body, the board provided guidance and support throughout the process, from the call for citizens, the selection of experts to the dissemination of results.
The members of the advisory board are: **Boris Ginner** (Chamber of Labour Vienna), **Petra Herczeg** (University of Vienna), **Stefan Jagsch** (Vienna Adult Education Centre), Wolfgang Renner (Vienna City Hall Library), **Walter Strobl** (Concordia Press Club), **Helga Tieben** (Austrian Economic Chambers), and **Alexander Warzilek** (Austrian Press Council).

The EU research project MeDeMAP

The MeDeMAP (Mapping Media for Future Democracies) research project, funded by the European Union's "Horizon Europe" programme, provides the foundation for the Austrian Citizens' Parliament on Media and Democracy. Under the leadership of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (OEAW), partners in ten EU countries are investigating the relationship between media and democracy, as well as citizens' demands for greater participation.
As part of the project, citizens' parliaments on media and democracy were held in parallel in Austria, Ireland, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic, as well as online in Germany.
The results of all citizens' parliaments will be presented in Brussels in early 2026.

It was enriching to put myself in the shoes of people with different views.

The 'de-bubbling' in the Citizens' Parliament was refreshing and enjoyable.

The citizens: Focus on diversity

The Austrian Citizens' Parliament on Media and Democracy comprises 20 citizens aged between 19 and 80. The group was selected from 140 applications based on diversity criteria, with the aim to reflect social diversity as broadly as possible in terms of age, gender, background, level of education, place of residence, and socio-political attitudes. Participants came from Vienna, Lower Austria, Upper Austria, Salzburg, Styria, and Burgenland. All contributed their ideas on how democracy can promote quality and open media, and how the media can contribute to a better democracy.

The 20 members of the Citizens' Parliament are:

Karin Aringer, Homa Bazafkan, Dietmar Csitkovics, Erna Dittelbach, Stephan Friedl, Josef Gstaltmeyr, Christina Jaques, Anastasia Knoll, Philip Kruschwitz, Alois Lachinger, Andreas Lechner, Nicole LoBianco, Johann Mühlecker, Andreas Mutschlechner, Julia Riener, Simon Schmidt, Christine Schwab, Fritz Stejskal, Eva Stemberger, Weijie Zheng.

➜
The committee work in the Citizens' Parliament

Being taken seriously as a citizen is important.

Facilitation is key to successful participation

Asking 20 people to develop recommendations on a complex topic in a short time is a very challenging task. However, it can succeed if the group is supported with methodological tools and human sensitivity.

Accompanied by the experienced facilitators **Ruth Picker, Markus Götsch** and **Rupert Roniger**, the 20 members of the Citizens' Parliament worked alternately in small groups and plenary sessions, according to the principles of the "Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations That Matter" (AoH). The key principles of this dialogue practice are that everyone has their say, that judgments are suspended, that divergent opinions are accepted, and that ideas are linked.

„Through dialogue, we experience that understanding is possible despite our differences of opinion. We learn what it feels like to express ourselves in peace and to be heard. We experience the power of deep listening and realize that there is room for everyone and that there are many shades of grey between black and white. This can lead to solutions that everyone can support." (Ruth Picker)

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The members of the Citizens' Parliament agree on joint rules for their cooperation.

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Experiencing and learning democracy: every voice is heard, and every opinion has a place.

Verena Hochleitner illustrated the input and questions on media and democracy during the first session.

Learning with experts from science and the media

Each session began with a learning phase for the citizens. Video interviews with representatives of the MeDeMAP research project introduced the main topic of the day. Experts from research and the media in Austria expanded upon this with a variety of perspectives and case studies.
The following experts provided inputs:

· **Josef Trappel,** Communication Policy and Media Economics, University of Salzburg
· **Nikolaus Forgó,** Information Technology and Intellectual Property Law, University of Vienna
· **Sieglinde Rosenberger,** Political Science, University of Vienna
· **Sarah Emler,** Journalist, ORF Foreign Affairs Department
· **Petra Herczeg,** Communication Studies, University of Vienna
· **Otto Tremetzberger,** Festival of Regions

Guests **Konrad Mitschka** (ORF-Public Value), **Alexander Warzilek** (Austrian Press Council), and **Ulli Weish** (Radio Orange 94.0) also answered questions from the participants. The graphic artists **Daniela Ekl** and **Verena Hochleitner** illustrated the inputs skilfully and pointedly and thus enriched the reflection.

Day 1: Media and Democracy

The first session focused on introducing the topic and the process of collaboration in the Citizens' Parliament. Communication scientist **Josef Trappel** from the University of Salzburg provided an overview of the relationship between media and democracy. He emphasized the role of democracy in supporting media freedom and outlined the media's core functions in a democratic society: providing information, exercising control, serving as a forum for public debate, enabling participation, and representing society.
Based on the discussion, participants identified key issues on which they wanted to adopt resolutions in future sessions.

It was good to see that others share my concerns about the future of democracy and the media.

I have become even more aware of the enormous importance of the media as the fourth pillar of democracy.

Josef Trappel, University of Salzburg, introduced the topic of media and democracy in the first session.
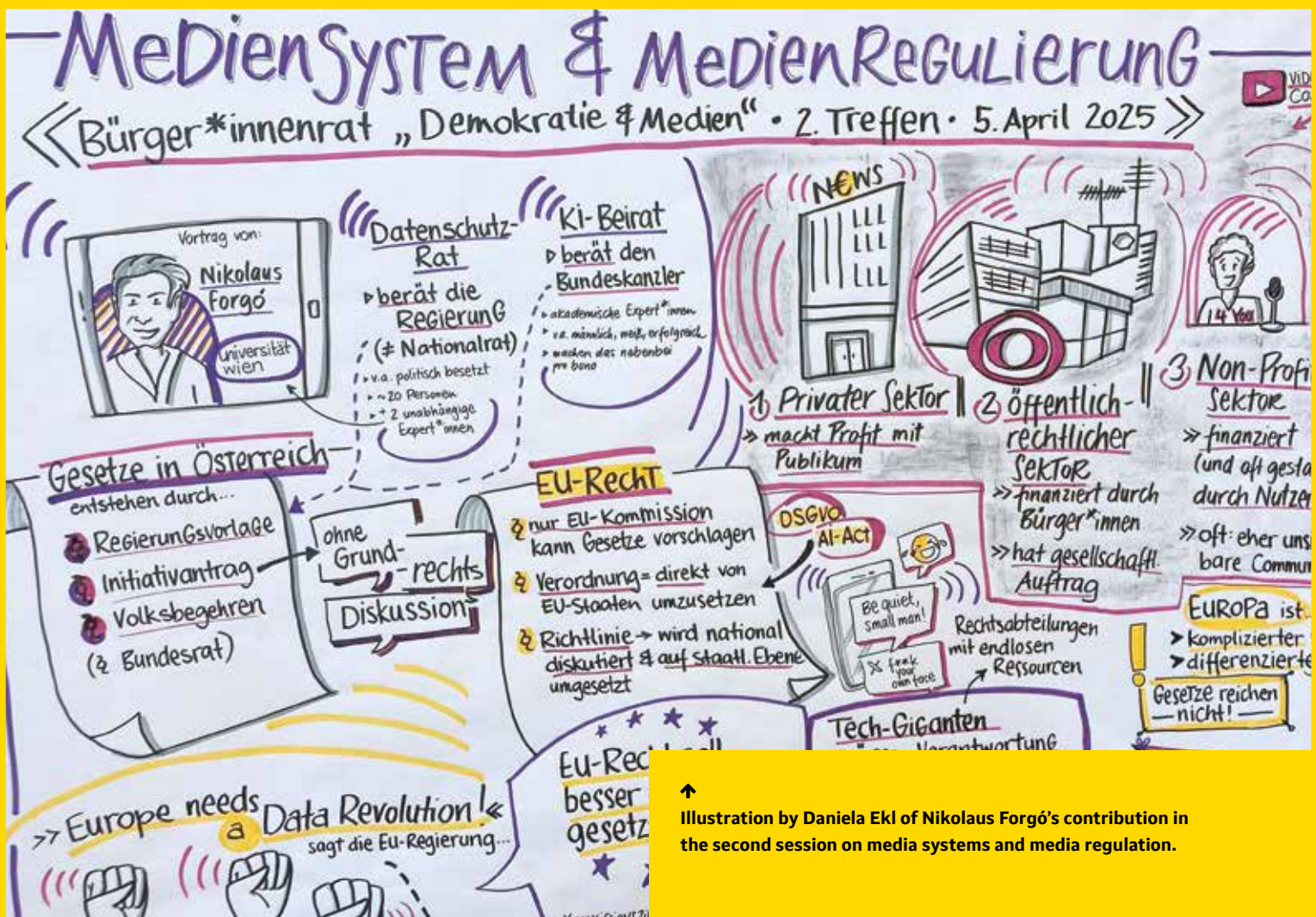
Day 2: Media systems and media regulation

During the second session, the participants discussed "Media systems and media regulation." **Nikolaus Forgó** of the University of Vienna provided insights into the possibilities of regulating media and digital platforms at the national and European levels.

Based on this information, the members of the Citizens' Parliament developed resolutions for promoting the quality of media content, media education, media freedom, and demands for a European media system.

Day 3: Participation in and through the media

The third session was devoted to "Participation in and through the media." **Sieglinde Rosenberger** (University of Vienna) emphasized the role of participation in the democratic process and the relationship between media, media use, and democracy. ORF journalist **Sarah Emler** provided national and international examples of how citizens can participate in and contribute to the media, such as writing letters to the editor or participating in online forums and community radio stations. In their resolutions, the members addressed removing barriers and strengthening participation at all levels.

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Journalist Sarah Emler presents practical examples of participation in and through the media in the third session.

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Illustration by Daniela Ekl of Nikolaus Forgó's contribution in the second session on media systems and media regulation.

Day 4: Representation in the media

The fourth and final session of the Citizens' Parliament focused on "Representation in the media." **Petra Herczeg** from the University of Vienna explained why democracy needs diversity and revealed how the media shape opinions in a polarized world. She also identified opportunities for greater diversity in the media. **Otto Tremetzberger,** the managing director of the Festival of Regions and a media publisher, pointed out the lack of diversity in the Austrian media landscape and highlighted areas in need of improvement.

The participants addressed these issues in their resolutions on strengthening diversity in the media and society. Finally, the citizens reflected on the entire Citizens' Parliament process and what they took away from participating in policymaking and democracy.

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A participant presents the draft resolutions of his committee in plenary.

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Graphic recorder Daniela Ekl with experts Petra Herczeg and Otto Tremetzberger at the fourth session.

The process remained pleasant, constructive, and enjoyable until the very end.

The decision-making process

How resolutions were jointly developed and adopted in the Citizens' Parliament was discussed by the members with the facilitators in the first session and determined at the beginning of the second.

First, proposals for resolutions were developed in committees. Within each committee, a consensus with a maximum of one veto vote had to be reached for a proposal to be brought to the plenary. The committees' proposals were then presented in the plenary session and evaluated individually by all members. Resolutions with justified vetoes were discussed in the plenary session and, if necessary, reworked to eliminate the veto votes. Only resolutions with fewer than four vetoes were passed. The Citizens' Parliament on Media and Democracy adopted a total of 50 resolutions aimed at strengthening the democratic role of the media. These resolutions are addressed to decision-makers in politics, the media, and education.

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How is a resolution developed in the committees before being presented to the plenary?

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The members evaluate the resolutions drafted in the committees.

The Resolutions

Democracy is the framework for living together in our diverse society. To actively participate in democracy, we need media that provide us with the best possible support. Media should provide trustworthy information, fulfil a control function vis-à-vis those exercising power, support social debates and exchange, represent social diversity and support the democratic participation of all citizens. A strong democracy therefore requires diverse media that fulfil the democratic, social and cultural needs of citizens. If media diversity and media quality are threatened, our democracy is also threatened.

Our resolutions are demands and suggestions aimed at media representatives, media and education policy makers and educational organisations – at local, regional, national and European level.

The results of our deliberations are based on an intensive discussion on the relationship between media and democracy and on helpful inputs from research and media practice. The fundamental question was: "What needs to change in order for the media to support democracy in the best possible way?"

Ensuring the quality of media content

We address: **the Austrian Federal Ministry for Housing, Arts, Culture, Media and Sport (BMWKMS)**

- **1:** Indicator-based media funding: Media funding should be linked to scientifically validated indicators measuring the promotion of democratic participation of citizens in the media and their evaluation. To this end, we call for the commissioning of a scientific study to define indicators that capture the participation of the population in the media as part of media quality.
- **2:** Strengthening the diversity of content: In the interests of a broader representation of topics, media funding should be linked to the obligation for the media to maintain a predefined proportion of 'minority topics' in their overall volume of content.
- **3:** Media education through media funding: If media education is seen as training in the critical consumption of different media, all forms of media funding should be linked to mandatory contributions to media education.
- **4:** Funding for journalist training: Funding for journalist training should be expanded.
- **5:** Funding of quality journalism: We call for a cap on advertisements from public funds. Public money should be used more for the targeted, transparent and independent funding of quality journalism.
- **6:** Promotion of quality journalism by the Austrian Press Council: Press funding should be linked to membership in the Austrian Press Council.
- **7:** Safeguarding quality journalism through the Austrian Press Council: The Austrian Press Council should be given powers to impose legal and financial sanctions.
- **8:** Restrict funding for free daily newspapers: Free daily newspapers that do not practice quality journalism should not receive any funding.
- **9:** Funding for community media: Access to funding for non-commercial community media should be made easier.
- **10:** Funding for umbrella organizations of community media: Funding for umbrella organizations of community media should be expanded so that they can support communities in the production of content.
- **11:** Transparency in the allocation of media funding: We call for the expansion of KommAustria's financial and human resources as an independent media authority. Funding decisions should be shifted from the Austrian Regulatory Authority for Broadcasting and Telecommunications, RTR GmbH, to KommAustria.
- **12:** Independence in decisions on media funding: Decisions on public funding for media should be made by independent expert advisory boards.
- **13:** Strengthening representation in funding advisory boards: Members of funding advisory boards should be politically independent and professionally competent. The composition of the boards should take into account representation with regard to diversity characteristics, in particular age, gender, sexual orientation, origin, religion, etc.

- **14:** Transparency in funding decisions: For more transparency in funding decisions, we call for the compilation of publicly accessible accountability reports on media funding. These reports should cover the matching of funding criteria, the funding amounts and those responsible for the decisions. A publicly accessible database should be created where the accountability reports are published.

We address: **Media organisations**

- **15:** Transparency regarding funding decisions in the media: For more transparency regarding funding decisions, media organisations should publish information on the funding they have received and on the funding database at regular intervals.
- **16:** Ensure, improve and make visible the quality of information in the media: The separation of fact-based and opinion-based content (e.g. report and opinion) should be made more clearly identifiable in all media.
- **17:** Promoting further training for journalists: We call for the expansion of further training opportunities for journalists that are free of charge (e.g. on the use of plain language in media).
- **18:** Direct line of communication in EU reporting: We call on Austrian media reporting on the EU to obtain accreditation in Brussels.

We address: **the Austrian Press Council**

- **19:** Popular petition on media quality: We call on the Austrian Press Council, in consultation with the Citizens' Parliament on Media and Democracy, to initiate a popular petition calling for an increase in media quality and raising awareness of the issue in society.

Promoting participation and access

We address: **Municipalities and the Austrian Federal Ministry for Housing, Arts, Culture, Media and Sport (BMWKMS)**

- **20:** Removing financial barriers by facilitating access to quality media: Quality newspapers should be distributed at municipal offices and other public places, such as public outdoor swimming pools, pensioners' clubs, doctors' offices. The costs for the purchase of quality newspapers should be covered by the quality journalism funding programme, analogous to the existing opportunities for schools to purchase newspapers.
- **21:** Easier access to time-independent use of quality media: We call for the creation of suitable forms of online access to quality newspapers via QR codes, which are made available at municipal offices and other public places, such as public outdoor swimming pools, pensioners' clubs, doctors' offices. The provision of online newspapers is to be ensured as part of the quality journalism funding programme.

We address: **Media organisations**

- **22:** Removing financial barriers to media access: We call on media companies to offer and promote 'Medio sospeso', i.e. donated newspaper subscriptions for socially disadvantaged people, analogous to the 'Caffè sospeso' model.
- **23:** Implementation of translation tools for online media: Translation tools for online reporting (e.g. online articles and videos) should be implemented to make journalistic content available for speakers of different languages.
- **24:** Low-threshold (local) opportunities for active participation in the media: We call for the organisation of citizens' forums on local topics and the use of information stands at public events and in public places to actively involve people in the media.
- **25:** Promote political interest: We call on media companies and politically active players to communicate best practice examples of political participation to the public in order to arouse more interest in participation processes.

We address: **the Austrian Federal Ministry for Housing, Arts, Culture, Media and Sport (BMWKMS)**

- **26:** Reduce language barriers: We call for more information programmes, for example news, events and publications in non-German languages (especially in the languages of migrant communities), in simple language and in sign language. Non-commercial media should receive special funding for this purpose and public service media should be obliged to do so.
- **27:** Innovative formats for political journalism: We call for a legal basis to fund creative and innovative formats in the media that present the democratic decision-making process of legislation in a clear and transparent way.

We address: **Municipalities and districts**

- **28:** Removing spatial barriers: We call for the promotion of creative projects for outreach media work in public spaces with a focus on local issues (using the example of Cap Radio's Radio Truck in California).
- **29:** Low-threshold local initiatives to promote civic participation: We call on municipalities and local civil society organisations to organise citizens' forums on local issues and to use information stands at events and in public places to motivate people to participate in politics.
- **30:** Factual reporting on political topics at municipal level: We call for factual reporting on political topics at municipal level (e.g. on municipal council meetings) in media that are produced or commissioned by the municipality (e.g. on social media platforms, in podcasts, etc.).

We address: **the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education (BMB) und the Austrian Federal Ministry for Women, Science and Research (BMFWF)**

- **31:** Reducing the ideological 'divide' in society: We call for the promotion of discussion and debating clubs in schools and in adult education with the aim of recognising diversity of opinion as an opportunity.

We address: **the Austrian Federal Provinces and the Federal Government**

- **32:** Promoting spaces for dialogue: Municipalities should be supported to create spaces for citizens' dialogue (using a lottery principle) for promoting the critical use of media and public discourse and thus contributing to a 'de-bubbling' in society.

We address: **the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF)**

- **33:** Provision of discussion spaces in public service media: We call for socially relevant topics to be discussed in prime-time television programmes from a wide range of opinions (e.g. reflection on the Covid measures, need for affordable housing, etc.). We see such programmes as a contribution to strengthening social cohesion. The prerequisites for success would be specially trained presenters and an invitation policy that gives space to different, but always fact-based opinions.

Media education for all

We address: **the Austrian Federal Ministry for Housing, Arts, Culture, Media and Sport (BMWKMS)**

· **34:** Media education in ORF's public service remit: If media education is seen as training in the critical consumption of different media, media education should be firmly anchored in ORF's public service remit, e.g. through a fixed percentage of broadcasting time.

We address: **the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education (BMB)**

· **35:** Media education in public educational institutions: If media education is seen as training in the critical consumption of different media, media education should be anchored in public educational institutions as early as possible on the educational pathway, for which appropriate resources (personnel, expertise) should be made available.

· **36:** Media education centres: We call for the nationwide expansion of funding for recreational educational projects to teach skills and creativity in the media field. The City of Vienna's media education centre can serve as a model here.

We address: **Institutions and organisations providing general adult education, e.g. adult education centres (VHS)**

· **37:** Media literacy courses in adult education: We call for the creation of more accessible media literacy courses in different languages. To this end, increased opportunities for cooperation between general adult education institutions (e.g. adult education centres) and civil society organisations (e.g. football clubs, cultural associations, diaspora associations) should be created.

We address: **the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF)**

· **38:** Funds for media literacy courses: We call for the provision of budget funds to finance multilingual media literacy courses.

Representation and diversity

We address: **the Austrian Federal Ministry for Housing, Arts, Culture, Media and Sport (BMWKMS)**

- **39:** Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in editorial teams: To ensure the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in editorial teams, we call for a legal basis for the mandatory implementation of quota regulations for all non-specialist or non-topic-specific media organisations.

We address: **Media organisations**

- **40:** Diversity in editorial teams: To fulfil the demand for diversity and plurality in media, the diversity of the population should be reflected in editorial teams. To this end, we call on the media to create appropriate incentive programmes, e.g. internships and training programmes.
- **41:** Making under-represented groups more visible: We call on media organisations to engage in more community work with under-represented groups (e.g. by actively approaching representatives of the groups, involving them in finding topics, inviting them as conversational partners).
- **42:** Increase diversity among recipients: To strengthen more diverse reporting in the media that also reaches the recipients, the media should present minority issues in such a way that they meet the needs and demands of the groups concerned.

We address: **the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF)**

- **43:** Strengthen reporting from local communities: We call on ORF to report on local/regional events based on suggestions from the population for at least 8 minutes per day in regional programmes throughout Austria.
- **44:** Representation of the diversity of Austrian society: We call for prime time television programmes in ORF that reflect the diversity of people living in Austria, e.g. respectful documentaries about families/individuals (such as the existing format "Alltagsgeschichten" ["everyday stories"]) in which representatives from urban/rural areas appear equally.

The European Union and Digital Platforms

We address: **the European Commission**

- **45:** Quality assurance of the European media system: We call for a European media system that is based on relevant quality criteria and European values.
- **46:** Support for civil society in EU member states where media freedom is under threat: We call for the creation of a financial framework to support civil society and NGOs in EU member states where media freedom is under threat for the purpose of
– supporting independent journalism
– producing and distributing content in the media
– creating opportunities for exchange with journalists in other EU member states.
- **47:** Taxation of large media and Digital Platforms: We call for quality-based taxation of large media, including Digital Platforms, by the EU.
- **48:** Ensure, improve and make visible the quality of information on Digital Platforms: Digital Platforms should be obliged to disclose their algorithms and to label content created by bots. The opening of accounts should require personal identification and a minimum age of 14 years. Personal data should be stored in encrypted form and only made accessible to the authorities for criminal prosecution.
- **49:** Mandatory moderation of posts on Digital Platforms: We call for the development of concepts as the basis for a legal regulation to remove highly visible posts that are criminally relevant and to label highly visible posts that are problematic.

We address: **Social Media Corporations and the European Union**

- **50:** Democracy-promoting algorithms: We call for algorithms of Digital Platforms to be adapted in such a way that the formation and hardening of bubbles is reduced. This is intended to strengthen diversity and plurality of opinion.