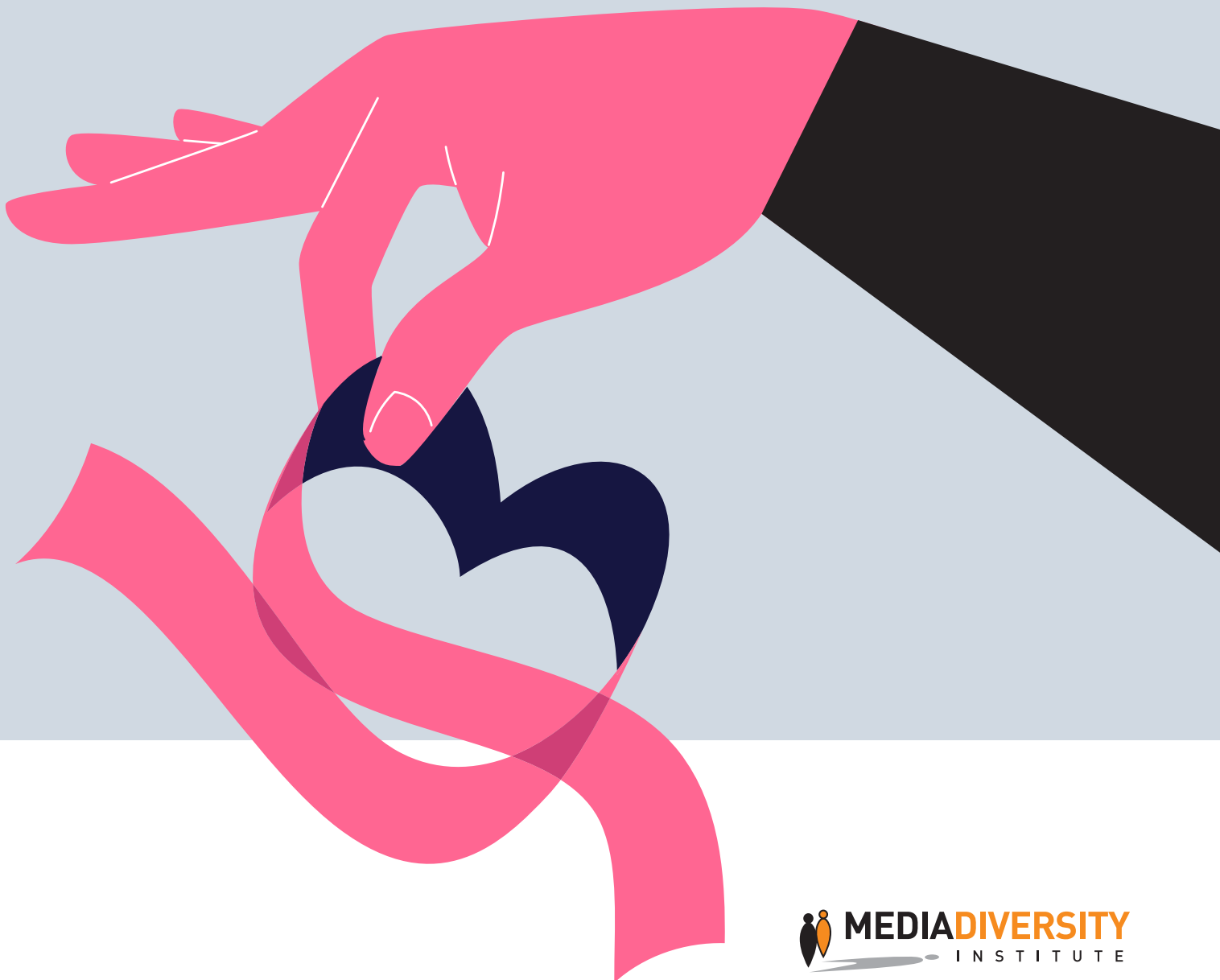


FROM TOLERANCE TO RECOGNITION

MDI's Evolving Fight for Accurate &
Responsible Representation of Sexual
Orientation in the Media (1998-2024)

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INTRO DUCTION ON

In the global struggle for LGBTQ+ rights, the media forms a central and deeply contested battleground. It has the ability to shape social realities, simultaneously acting as a potential engine of empathy and inclusion and a vector for stigma, misinformation, and backlash. For decades, journalistic narratives have framed homosexuality not as a legitimate identity but as a sinister “agenda”. At the same time, the recent rise of transgender rights has triggered a new global wave of polemic and misrepresentation.

This report analyses over a quarter-century-long endeavour of the Media Diversity Institute (MDI) to navigate this contested landscape and reconfigure media systems around the principled inclusion across all sexual orientations. Drawing on a portfolio of projects from 1998 to 2024, it argues that MDI’s work on sexual orientation reveals a deliberate evolution in tactics, a journey from promoting broad tolerance within media landscapes to demanding active recognition and legal protection. This shift was not linear but was forged in response to a hardening global environment. It will trace how MDI’s approach was reshaped by the escalating “anti-gender” backlash, the unique challenges of working in illiberal states and the digital revolution that amplified both hate speech and new forms of resistance. By analysing the funding that enabled this work, the evolving objectives of key projects, and their tangible impacts and limitations, this report charts the unfinished struggle to build media ecosystems where LGBTQ+ people are not merely visible but authentically represented.

I. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS: SEXUAL ORIENTATION AS A CONTESTED IDENTITY

Campaigns against discrimination based on sexual orientation have been a defining feature of social movements since the 1960s, leading to the decriminalisation of homosexuality across much of the Americas and Europe. The subsequent struggle shifted towards enshrining anti-discrimination protections in law. Throughout these periods, news media have played a dual role, both amplifying activist demands and, at times, sensationalising or platforming opposition. As the primary vector by which society tells itself about itself, popular media transmit ideas of what behaviour is acceptable and whose identities are legitimate, thereby perpetuating and, at times, transforming the social order (Dias et al., 2023). This dualism is evident in rhetorical strategies that frame homosexuality not as an identity but as a sinister “agenda”, where certain media outlets give voice to conservative figures who claim gay rights advocates are promoting “propaganda” under the guise of “tolerance and diversity” (Zingsheim, in Akita et al., 2015).

In the 2010s, the primary campaign in the Western World was for same-sex marriage and legal partnerships. Media coverage of this era was pivotal, with journalistic narratives often focusing on personal stories to build public empathy. However, this period also saw a consolidation of opposition in media discourse: early news coverage of gays and lesbians was delegitimising, ridiculing them at best and portraying them as dangerous at worst (Billard & Gross, 2020). As coverage evolved, the identities and issues of LGBTQ+ people became subjects of contentious debate, often framed within competing value frames of “traditional morality” versus “equality”, which positioned gay and lesbian rights as fundamentally about competing social values (*ibid*). This framing provided ideological fuel for political mobilisation against equal marriage. Concurrently, a more affirming media landscape began to emerge, with pioneering television dramas from other regions offering powerful same-sex narratives, serving as “creative device[s] in conveying ‘temporality’ [...] relative to the context of affect and the ability to reach out” (Pullen, 2014, 2).

This contest over legitimacy has tangible, even life-threatening, consequences. Nowhere is this more evident than in the field of public health. For marginalised groups like young African American men who have sex with men (YMSM), who bear a disproportionate burden (with those aged 13-24 representing 72% of new infections among youth) of the HIV epidemic, the media is a primary source of information. However, portrayals often provide “inaccurate images of African American gay men”, a framing which actively “reinforce[s] HIV-related stigma and discrimination” (Rose & Friedman, 2019, p. 621), demonstrating how media misrepresentation can directly enable poorer health outcomes.

In the 21st century, a notable disparity persists between the rights of LGBTQ+ people in the Americas and North-Western Europe and those in the Global South, where homosexuality remains criminalised. In the Americas and North-Western Europe, while a vehement backlash persists, legal frameworks and much of the media landscape operate within a debate largely centred on recognition and equality. In contrast, across much of the Global South and in illiberal states, the foundational contest is still over basic existence and decriminalisation. This has created mass controversy, particularly regarding global events such as the FIFA World Cup in Russia in 2018 and Qatar in 2022, where international journalistic outlets heavily criticised FIFA for hosting a global event in countries which have criminalised same-sex

relations (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Nevertheless, in Russia, media narratives still work in tandem with state policy, such as the “gay propaganda” law, to create an environment of “growing oppression” for queer citizens (Pullen, 2014). In Vietnam, a more ambivalent media landscape pathologises gay men by persistently associating them with HIV/AIDS, potentially triggering “moral panic”, while simultaneously portraying them as victims of discrimination (Nguyen & Clancy, 2025). This positions its media in a transitional phase, moving beyond non-recognition but not yet achieving accurate, respectful representation.

Crucially, the frontline of this contest has expanded to encompass transgender rights¹ and identity. Although being transgender pertains to gender identity rather than sexual orientation, the transgender community has always been part of the broader LGBTQ+ rights movement and is very much partnered with anti-homophobic campaigns (TransWrites, 2024). The global backlash against transgender rights in the 2020s, while distinct, is deeply interwoven with opposition to sexual orientation rights, as conservative movements see both as part of a singular “deviant” queer culture threatening societal order (Billard & Gross, 2020). Media plays a key role in this, with outlets often reinforcing state-sanctioned discrimination through practices like deadnaming² and misgendering, as seen in the Malaysian media’s coverage of transgender woman Nur Sajat (Roslan & Jamal, 2024). This dynamic is further complicated by the distinct ways in which LGBTQ+ emerging adults themselves consume and critique media; they report that while traditional media can validate identity, it often presents one-dimensional stereotypes and limits perceptions of future trajectories, whereas new media offers vital spaces for discussion, creativity and self-representation (McInroy & Craig, 2016). This interconnected struggle underscores that the fight for media representation of sexual orientation is no longer (and perhaps never was) a discrete battle, but part of a broader ongoing struggle over the very terms of identity, recognition and power in the modern world.

II. THE FINANCIAL BLUEPRINT: FUNDING THE FIGHT FOR VISIBILITY

The evolution of MDI’s work on sexual orientation was, in many ways, aligned with the policies that have underpinned its funding calls. The scope, tone and very feasibility of its projects have been continuously shaped and sometimes constrained by the strategic priorities of its donors, reflecting broader geopolitical shifts in the acceptance of and backlash against LGBTQ+ rights. This financial history reveals a clear trajectory from early, cautiously integrated initiatives to contemporary targeted advocacy, which can be mapped across three overlapping phases.

a. Integrated Funding and Soft Advocacy (1998-2014)

The inaugural phase of funding, spanning the early 2000s to the early 2010s, was characterised by a cautious approach. Donors such as the European Commission and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO, now FCD0) supported projects in which sexual orientation was one strand within a broader diversity landscape. One project which presents this cautious approach, is **Reporting Diversity: Training the media, empowering minorities; a project for**

1. The promotion of rights for people who identify with a gender they were not assigned at birth.

2. Calling (a transgender person) by their birth name when they have changed their name as part of their gender transition.

improved media coverage of ethnic and minority issues in the South Caucasus (2003-2006)

which received diverse funding from the European Commission, The Eurasian Foundation and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in order to create diversity-inclusive journalism manuals in Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia which included focus on LGBTQ+ communities, alongside gendered issues, religious tolerance and different ethnic minorities in the South Caucasus. Initiatives, such as the ***European Union: Study on Media and Diversity (2007-2009)***, were primarily research and conference-based, aiming to catalogue best practices and promote diversity to European decision-makers. Sexual inclusion was presented as part of a constructive, non-confrontational package of European values, incentivising change rather than demanding it. Similarly, the FCO-funded ***Reporting Diversity: A Project to Promote Inter-Community Dialogue and Moderate Voices as a Means to Prevent Religious Radicalisation in Egypt (2008-2011)*** focused on inter-community dialogue, with training that included sexual orientation among several topics. The funding modality here was crucial, enabling MDI to establish a foothold on the issue but within safer, generalised parameters. It must also be noted that, for these early projects, although diversity of sexual orientations was an essential part of the diversity curricula and outputs, it was threaded within a wider landscape of diversity reporting. Therefore, they also focused on multiple diversity topics, including ethnicity, religion, and gender.

A project which also presents the tumultuous nature of funding for MDI regarding diversity of the media focusing on sexual orientation, is the ***Support for Inclusive Society in Cuba: Enhancing the Capacities of Civil Society and the Media (2009-2015)*** funded by the International Republican Institute, across three different trips to Cuba to create inclusive workshops for women, ethnic minority and crucially LGBTQ+ journalists. Although this project did highlight LGBTQ+ rights more directly, funding was gradual, being administered in three different trips. The last iteration in 2014 had to be hosted in Spain because the previous workshop in 2011 ended abruptly, as MDI staff had to leave immediately due to increased surveillance by Cuban state security. Thus, showing how funding was precarious and cautious in many of the regions in which MDI initially tried to work.

Therefore, LGBTQ+ issues are not the primary focus within these projects. This reflects how LGBTQ+ people faced repression, particularly in regions such as the Caribbean, the Middle East and Central Asia, where MDI was working. Yet it was essential, from MDI's inception, to bring this issue to light within the broader goal of media diversity.

b. Targeted Interventions and Encountering Resistance (2014-2020)

By the mid-2010s, a strategic pivot occurred as funding began to support more targeted goals, coinciding with a rising global backlash against LGBTQ+ rights. The Open Society Foundation's support for ***Our Elections, Our Europe! – Engaging European Youth to Counter Hate Speech, Promote Diversity, and Encourage Inclusion (2014)*** explicitly aimed to counter hate speech, including homophobic rhetoric, during electoral periods. Meanwhile, the European Commission's funding for ***Media Against Hate (2016-2018)*** marked a significant shift towards specificity, developing training modules that used real-world examples to help journalists legally identify anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech. However, this period was also defined by a rude awakening: the FCO-funded ***Russia: Fighting Discrimination Through Inclusive Reporting (2013-2014)*** revealed the limitations of donor support in hostile political environments. Despite training journalists, the project documented direct censorship, with editors blocking articles on LGBTQ+ issues. This demonstrated that funding for training alone was insufficient without a strategy to counter national-level institutional resistance, a lesson that would shape future financial decisions.

c. Digital Frontlines and Cohesive Society Building (2020-Present)

The most recent phase reflects a maturation of strategy, with funding increasingly channelled towards digital resilience and direct policy influence in challenging contexts. Donors like the Thomson Reuters Foundation and the European Commission have backed projects with explicit, ambitious aims. ***Inclusive Media, Cohesive Society (2020-2023)*** in Lebanon and ***Reporting Diversity Network: RDN 2.0 (2020-2024)*** in the Balkans focus on changing legislation concerning online hate speech and content moderation. The funding here acknowledges that in nations with homophobic legislation or monopolistic media landscapes, the objective cannot be mere promotion but must be structural accountability. This represents a move away from short-term training and output grants towards multi-year commitments that blend institutional resources with grassroots digital-first partnerships, building coalitions designed to withstand political pressure.

In short, the financial architecture of MDI's work on sexual orientation reveals a clear evolution: a chronological move from soft integrated advocacy to targeted, resilient coalition-building; an operational shift from broad awareness-raising to specific digital and policy tools; and a geographic expansion into contexts where funding must support not just inclusion, but direct resistance to state-sanctioned discrimination.

III. EVOLVING OBJECTIVES, REFLECTING AN INCREASINGLY POLARISED WORLD

MDI's project objectives over the past two decades show a trajectory of strategic adaptation, moving from a paradigm of gentle persuasion to one of resilient advocacy in the face of escalating global polarisation, and reflecting a deepening understanding that achieving fair representation for LGBTQ+ people requires not just changing minds but systematically challenging the institutional practices and digital ecosystems that perpetuate discrimination.

a. From Integrated Promotion to Targeted Defence

In the earliest phases, objectives were integrated and foundational, aiming to softly weave sexual orientation into broader diversity training within academic institutions and into local journalists' media output. Projects like ***Reporting Diversity: Training the media, empowering minorities; a project for improved media coverage of ethnic and minority issues in the South Caucasus (2003-2006)***, ***Reporting Diversity: A Project to Promote Inter-Community Dialogue and Moderate Voices as a Means to Prevent Religious Radicalisation in Egypt (2008-2011)***, ***Support for Inclusive Society in Cuba: Enhancing the Capacities of Civil Society and the Media (2009-2015)***, and ***European Union: Study on Media and Diversity (2007-2009)*** sought to promote inclusivity as a universal professional standard, operating on the assumption that raising awareness and improving journalistic practice was the primary path to change. Success was measured in the number of journalistic training workshops delivered and in the creation of media articles and outputs that sought to portray diverse representation to British and European decision-makers.

This approach, however, soon met the empirical reality of institutional resistance. The pivotal **Russia: Fighting Discrimination Through Inclusive Reporting (2013-2014)** project marked a turn towards specificity, with the objective of training 80 journalists to produce tangible articles focused on marginalised groups, including LGBTQ+ people. Yet, the project's most significant finding was the obstruction its trainees faced, with editors blocking 40 submitted articles on LGBTQ+ topics. This demonstrated that objectives focused solely on individual journalists were insufficient without a strategy to counter meso-level institutional censorship. Consequently, the project's recommendations shifted toward building consortia of sympathetic journalists and CSOs, making coalition-building a primary objective in hostile environments where direct institutional change was impossible.

Countering Hate Speech and Legislative Pushback

By the mid-2010s, as anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric became a staple of populist and far-right movements across Europe and beyond, MDI's objectives sharpened to directly counter these narratives. Projects like **Media Against Hate (2016-2018)** moved beyond ethical guidance to practical defence, creating training modules that used hypothetical hateful comments about "homosexual performers" to teach journalists and educators how to legally identify and classify hate speech. The objective was no longer just about fair portrayal but about active protection and legal literacy.

This period also solidified a strategic shift towards consortium-building as a primary objective in hostile environments. In Russia, where direct editorial reform was impossible, the project's key recommendation, and thus its de facto objective, became building a coalition of trained journalists and sympathetic CSOs to sustain the effort despite institutional opposition. Similarly, in 2014, the final stage of the **Support for Inclusive Society in Cuba: Enhancing the Capacities of Civil Society and the Media (2009-2015)** project had to be completed in Barcelona due to increased Cuban interference. This represented a pragmatic pivot from attempting to change media institutions from within to forging external alliances that could create pressure and maintain visibility from the outside.

Digital Advocacy and Policy Change

The most contemporary phase of MDI's work engages directly with the digital amplification of hate and the imperative of policy change. Objectives have become overtly systemic, targeting the macro-level forces that shape media landscapes. Indeed, in countries with limited media regulation laws, media landscapes are often run as monopolies, whereby cases of homophobic hate speech are common across the media. Thus, in Lebanon and the Balkans, projects like **Inclusive Media, Cohesive Society (2020-2023)** and **Reporting Diversity Network (RDN) 2.0 (2020-2024)**, whilst by no means adversarial to the governments of the nations they worked in, explicitly aim to change national legislation on online content moderation and tackle digital hate speech. Training has evolved in parallel, moving beyond traditional journalists to equip digital rights activists and CSOs with skills in digital monitoring tools, counter-narrative campaign design, and personal digital safety to protect against online harassment. This evolution, from integrated awareness to targeted defence and finally to digital policy advocacy, illustrates a strategic journey from urging for inclusion to building the tools and alliances necessary to demand it against rising global resistance.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS AND STRATEGIC ADAPTATION

The trajectory of MDI's projects reveals a clear evolution in its strategic recommendations, a pragmatic adaptation to the vastly different political and social landscapes in which it operates, therefore moving from broad advocacy to targeted context-specific pathways for change, all while navigating the tension between aspirational goals and the realities of resistance.

In its earliest projects within more permissive European contexts, such as the **European Union: Study on Media and Diversity (2007-2009)**, MDI's recommendations were framed in a non-intrusive, constructive manner. The approach was to showcase the benefits of diversity measures to key stakeholders and media decision-makers, incentivising change by promoting more diverse representation in state media and suggesting alterations to media legislation. This tone was designed for influence and collaboration within systems that were, at least nominally, open to reform.

However, in projects where direct access to decision-makers was limited or the environment was overtly hostile, the recommendations pivoted decisively towards building civil society capacity as a primary strategy. For initiatives like **Reporting Diversity Network: RDN 2.0 (2020-2024)**, **Media Against Hate (2016-2018)** and **Reporting Diversity: A Project to Promote Inter-Community Dialogue and Moderate Voices as a Means to Prevent Religious Radicalisation in Egypt (2008-2011)**, the focus shifted to creating large consortia of journalists, academics and CSOs to sustain the project's goals. This was most drastic in the case of the Russia project (**Fighting Discrimination Through Inclusive Reporting (2013-2014)**), where the explicit recommendation for consortium building was a direct response to the "resistance among Russian media leaders to adopt tolerant reporting practices", as illustrated by editors blocking the publication of 40 articles on LGBTQ+ issues by MDI-trained journalists. In such adversarial contexts, coalition-building became the essential first step to create a social force that could continue to advocate for change where direct institutional reform was impossible.

This strategic adaptation also extended to practical project tools. Initiatives like **Our Elections, Our Europe! – Engaging European Youth to Counter Hate Speech, Promote Diversity, and Encourage Inclusion (2014)** and **Inclusive Media in Lebanon (2020-2023)** highlighted the need for better translation services to reach more diverse audiences and to engage a wider range of academics and CSOs. While this was less of an issue for well-resourced, multilingual European Commission projects, it became a key recommendation for ensuring local relevance and accessibility in more complex operational environments.

Ultimately, strong continuity underpins all of MDI's work: the pursuit of a robust legal structure to protect diversity and inclusion in media. The strategic difference lies in the pathway to achieve it. In more inclusive countries, recommendations are delivered directly to media stakeholders and established partners. In hostile nations, the recommendation is at first to forge coalitions that can eventually articulate those demands. Therefore, the nature of MDI's recommendations serves as a precise barometer of the political environment: the more resistant the context, the more the strategy relies on building social forces from the ground up, laying the groundwork for an inclusive media landscape that remains, for now, incomplete.

V. IMPACT AND COALITION LEGACY

The impact of MDI's projects on sexual orientation reveals a consistent and dual-faceted legacy, defined by the force of coalition-building and the sobering reality of contextual deep-seated resistance. Across all initiatives, the most significant impact has been the construction of consortia and partnerships within the countries of operation. In many cases, this coalition-building with local partners resulted in extremely strong partnerships that left a lasting impact on the local community.

Clear examples of these long-lasting effects are evident in projects like **Reporting Diversity Network: RDN 2.0 (2020-2024)**, which partnered with Belgrade Pride, one of the largest Pride organisations in the Balkans. Through this collaboration, they shared recordings of hateful online rhetoric, producing informative and educational social media content documenting six specific incidents. Similarly, the **Our Elections, Our Europe! – Engaging European Youth to Counter Hate Speech, Promote Diversity, and Encourage Inclusion (2014)** project helped local partners in Italy and Hungary, whose anti-xenophobia campaigns and satirical cartoons continue to counter far-right rhetoric beyond the project's lifespan. A poignant example comes from Thessaloniki, where a partner CSO, Symbiosis, created its first video story focusing on LGBTQ+ representation, which was praised by the community and shown at the Thessaloniki Pride parade in 2014. In addition, the project **Through Inclusion to Stability and Harmony: Strengthening the Capacities of Chinese Journalists and CSOs to Advocate for and Promote the Human Rights of Marginalised Groups through Cross-Sector Collaboration (2018-2021)**, MDI was able to oversee and aid in the creation of online content inclusive and supportive of transgender people across Chinese social media, where unfortunately pro-LGBTQ+ content is discouraged. This demonstrates the impact MDI can facilitate by building coalitions with local partners and leveraging broader community engagement and social media to promote greater queer representation.

Unfortunately, in other contexts, impact has been severely stifled by high levels of discrimination. The project **Russia: Fighting Discrimination Through Inclusive Reporting (2013-2014)** found that while some editors showed interest, overall attitudes remained very hostile, and the project's impact was limited. The combination of divisive public attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people and the increasingly authoritarian Russian government created an insurmountable political barrier to inclusive media. This reactionary resistance is a consistent issue, as seen in Morocco, where MDI was accused by multiple media reports of "promoting homosexuality" following a local project, showing how persistent prejudice can negatively impact projects and create difficulties for CSOs. In nations with anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, creating a coalition of like-minded organisations becomes a much harder task, challenged by authorities, wary local partners and general anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes.

A telling impact, with both positive and negative connotations, is that MDI is now generally perceived as a pro-LGBTQ+ organisation. This identity has made it significantly easier to build coalitions across the EU with other CSOs and Pride organisations. However, this very same perception has made it far more difficult to bridge the gap for LGBTQ+ rights and representation in nations such as Russia or in the Middle East, thus reiterating one of the most crucial issues in the global struggle for LGBTQ+ representation: the vast disparity in legal safeguards depending on the context of the country they are in.

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GLOSSARY OF MDI PROJECTS

(Full name, timespan and funder)

(Link available)

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[European Union: Study on Media and Diversity \(2007–2009\)](#) - European Commission

[Reporting Diversity: A Project to Promote Inter-Community Dialogue and Moderate Voices as a Means to Prevent Religious Radicalisation in Egypt \(2008–2011\)](#) - UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office

[A European Dialogue on the EU Media and Diversity Study \(2009–2010\)](#) - European Commission, Europe For Citizens Programme

[Support for Inclusive Society in Cuba: Enhancing the Capacities of Civil Society and the Media \(2009–2015\)](#) - International Republican Institute

[Russia: Fighting Discrimination Through Inclusive Reporting \(2013–2014\)](#) - European Commission

[Our Elections, Our Europe! – Engaging European Youth to Counter Hate Speech, Promote Diversity, and Encourage Inclusion \(2014\)](#) - European Commission

[Dune Voices: Bringing the Voices of the Sahara into the Public Sphere \(2014–2017\)](#) - Arab Partnership Fund, UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office

[MAMIL: Macedonian Media and Information Literacy Coalition \(2016–2018\)](#) - European Commission

[Media Against Hate \(2016–2018\)](#) - European Commission

[INFOTAINMENT \(2016–2021\)](#) - USA State Department

[Through Inclusion to Stability and Harmony: Strengthening the Capacities of Chinese Journalists and CSOs to Advocate for and Promote the Human Rights of Marginalised Groups through Cross-Sector Collaboration \(2018–2021\)](#) - USA State Department

[Inclusive Media, Cohesive Society \(2020–2023\)](#) - Thomson Reuters Foundation

[Reporting Diversity Network \(RDN\) 2.0 \(2020–2024\)](#) - European Commission, Balkan Trust for Democracy, a project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Belgrade

