

**MEDIA INNOVATION EUROPE:
TOWARDS RESILIENT PUBLIC-INTEREST MEDIA ECOSYSTEM**

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

AUDIENCE-ENGAGED JOURNALISM GRANTS

**Deadline for application:
12 OCTOBER 2026 (MIDNIGHT, CET)**



Co-funded by
the European Union

1. BACKGROUND

[Media Innovation Europe](#) is a multidisciplinary, multi-project programme that has funded over 100 news organisations in the past four years. The first edition was launched in 2022 to energize the European ecosystem for independent and local journalism, stimulating innovation, sustainable business models and collaboration among media outlets. The second phase of the programme launched in 2024, continuing MIE's immersive training approach, focusing on networking-building and providing consultancies and guidance to participating newsrooms. MIE is delivered by a consortium of organisations led by the Vienna-based [International Press Institute](#) (IPI), along with [Thomson Media](#) (TF), the [The Fix Foundation](#) (TFF) and the [Balkan Investigative Reporting Network](#) (BIRN).

The third phase of the programme, titled Media Innovation Europe: Towards a Resilient Public-Interest Media Ecosystem, [launched in June 2026](#) and will, over the next two years, continue supporting independent media across Europe by strengthening the resilience, sustainability and innovation capacity of public-interest news organisations.

As part of MIE, BIRN manages Audience-Engaged Journalism Grants aiming at empowering newsrooms to engage citizens in investigative reporting. Grants are available to newsrooms in the following European countries: **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czech Republic, Hungary, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Serbia and Slovakia.**

2. SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) has been involving communities in reporting and supporting media outlets and journalists through grants, training and mentoring. BIRN has also developed a **digital tool** which enables journalists to gain insights from the community and involve the audience in the reporting process. The tool also enables the analysis of large scale crowdsource information to produce compelling reports.

Audience-engaged journalism aims to amplify voices of underrepresented communities, including women, young people, marginalised groups and ethnic minorities, to share their information. By engaging their communities, media outlets increase trust and credibility and uncover underreported stories that can provoke impact. Ultimately, media outlets are using innovation to create an inclusive media landscape that will foster democracy and free speech in their region and their local communities. The previous audience-engaged stories achieved significant impact, including national and international awards, expanded national coverage, and concrete actions taken by citizens or officials within the community.

The audience-engaged journalism grants are designed to achieve the following outcomes with project-supported media outlets:

- Access to BE Engaged tool (BE tool), which will be actively used in projects to involve communities in story development;
- Training in engagement journalism and BE tool usage;
- On-the-job mentoring in audience-engaged story production by experienced mentors;



- Production of investigative and engaging stories of local and regional interest that are based on information crowdsourced using BE tool for audience-engagement;
- Support to join forces and collaborate, sharing knowledge and expertise with one another;
- Support to continue using the BE tool, fostering a sustained culture of community engagement.

3. TYPE, SIZE AND DURATION OF GRANTS

Two following types of grants are available under this Call for Applications:

- **Individual grants** for media outlets covering national/regional/local topics using their own newsroom resources.
- **Cross-border grants** for at least two media outlets investigating cross-border topics in partnership with the other media outlet. The Audience-Engaged Journalism Grants foster a collaborative environment where media outlets join forces to share their proficiency and expertise. By collaborating media outlets not only enhance their reporting capabilities but also increase their reach and impact.

Partnership can be:

- Pre-established: in situations where a media outlet already has a media partner for a cross-border story, they may apply together for a grant of €9,400 to cover expenses for both parties.
- Individual story pairing: in cases where individual applicants are proposing the similar story or share an interest, BIRN might propose that outlets pair up to complement their expertise and knowledge.

Media outlets are expected to begin implementing their project's activities on **1 December 2026**. Their projects can last up to a **maximum of eight (8) months** from the date of contract signature. All activities **must conclude** no later than **31 July 2027**.

4. AVAILABLE FUNDING AND ALLOCATIONS

The overall indicative amount expected to be distributed under this Call for Applications is up to €37,600. The table summarises grants foreseen to be given.

Type of Grants	Maximum Amount per Grant	Number of Grants Foreseen	Estimated Amount
Individual grants	€4,700	Up to 4	€18,800
Cross-border grants (two media outlets)	€9,400	Up to 2	€18,800

BIRN reserves the right to fund any, all, or none of the applications received, and may decide which type of grant to award successful applicants in order to reach the overall planned number of grants within the programme.

No co-financing from the applicant's side is expected or is obligatory within this Call for Applications.



The **Audience-Engaged Journalism** grants process starts with this Call, which will be open until **12 October 2026**. To provide more accurate information and directions for applicants, the BIRN team will organise **an info session, on 7 September 2026 (14:00 CET)**. Please see [5.4.4. Clarifications. Question & Answers](#).

5. APPLICATION

This section includes important information on the rules for application, including eligibility criteria, activities and costs eligibility, application and evaluation procedures, among others.

5.1. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Eligible applicants are legally registered media organisations from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czech Republic, Hungary, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Serbia and Slovakia.

In order to apply, applicants must fulfil the following criteria:

1. Demonstrate a commitment to producing high-quality, independent journalism that serves the public interest.
2. Propose a story with a clear investigative and in-depth dimension, one that is meaningful and impactful for the community it addresses, and that involves and engages the community directly in exploring a topic of relevance to them.
 - If applying for an individual grant, the proposed story must address an issue relevant to the national/regional/local audience.
 - If applying for a cross-border grant, the proposed story must address an issue relevant to audiences in Balkan and Visegrad countries, and reflect collaborative effort.
3. Express clear intention and means of including underrepresented communities in stories. These communities may include marginalised groups such as national minorities, youth, LGBTQ+, women and other underreported communities.
4. Be a legally registered entity within the country of application on or before 1 January, 2024.
5. Be able to provide supporting documentation as listed in [5.4.1 Application Form Content](#).
6. Demonstrate a commitment to actively participate in on-the-job mentoring in engagement journalism and the professional use of BE tool, following the guidance provided by mentors and BE tool coordinator.

5.2. ACTIVITIES ELIGIBILITY

The types of activities eligible for support include but are not necessarily limited to:

1. Producing the content based on information and data obtained via the BE tool. Grantees will receive individual access to the BE tool, along with appropriate [training and mentoring](#). Content may comprise news, analysis, investigations, different news



formats: audio, text, video or multimedia. As part of the previous edition of Media Innovation Europe, media outlets produced a range of audience-engaged stories, some examples of which you can read here:

- [‘A State-Backed Social Disease’: How Gambling Flourishes in Serbia and Bosnia](#)
 - [‘Smile More’: Women Still Judged by Looks in North Macedonia’s Job Market](#)
 - [I’ll destroy your life: Dating Apps Threats Facing Gay Men in Serbia](#)
 - [Prostitution and Drug Abuse: How Hungary Is Failing the Children in its Care](#)
 - [‘Tragicomic’: Ex-Political Prisoners in Albania Still Awaiting Compensation](#)
2. Promoting content through social media channels of the respective outlets.
 3. Promoting engagement journalism and the BE tool by introducing dedicated sections on the website, additional information in the ‘about’ and ‘contact’ section, banners, and other relevant means.
 4. Encouraging citizens to use the BE tool as a platform to suggest topics, indicate interest in future reporting and participate in various investigations. These activities may be facilitated through social media channels and innovations on the website described above.
 5. Collaborating with a mentor to prepare a story for Balkan Insight. The most successful engagement stories will be considered for publication on the [Balkan Insight](#). The BIRN team and mentors will oversee the selection process to ensure the stories align with the project’s objectives and BI’s publishing standards.

Applicants may propose additional activities beyond those listed above, ensuring their alignment with the project’s vision and goal. These activities should complement the existing ones and may include any relevant investigative engagement stories.

5.3 COSTS ELIGIBILITY

While developing the budget for the proposal under this Call for Applications (*budget form enclosed in [5.4.1 Application Form Content](#)*) the following eligible and ineligible costs should be:

Eligible Costs	
Category	Explanation
Human Resources Costs	Costs of organisation’s staff and experts directly involved in implementing the proposed activities and proportionate to their level of involvement.
Production / Research / Communication Costs	Costs related to the production of the stories, including communication with stakeholders, research costs, as well as costs of promotion of the stories on social media.
Travel Costs	Any travel costs needed to produce the story, especially if it’s a cross-border story or story covering citizen’s experiences in some local or more remote areas in the country
Ineligible Costs	



Include costs of office equipment, construction costs, entertainment and excessive transport and event costs.

5.4 APPLICATION SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS

In order to ensure a fair and competitive application process, each applicant may submit a maximum of two applications under this Call: one individual application and one cross-border application. However, each media outlet may be awarded a grant only once — where an applicant's individual and cross-border applications are both eligible, only the highest-scoring one will be considered for funding. If you are applying for a cross-border story with a partner, you will need to submit documents for both yourself and the partner media outlet.

5.4.1. APPLICATION FORM CONTENT

In order to apply for the Audience-Engaged Journalism Grants, media outlets should:

- **Fill out an [online application form](#)** which should:
 - Be completed in English and reflect the applicant's own original work.
 - Outline general information, current audience data, and a story proposal.
- **Submit the following supporting documents** within the embedded application form:
 - Financial Proposal. Download the budget template [HERE](#).
 - Financial Statements for the 2024 and 2025 fiscal years, if applicable.
 - Certificate from relevant tax authority that the media outlet is a regular taxpayer.
 - A Court Certificate that the media outlet does not have ongoing legal proceedings nor is awaiting the final judgment of cases against the organization. Note: If obtaining a Court Certificate confirming no ongoing legal proceedings is challenging (e.g., due to SLAPP lawsuits), applicants may submit a detailed explanation of their legal status and the nature of such cases. This ensures equal opportunities for all while maintaining transparency and compliance with administrative requirements.
 - Editorial policy, if applicable.
 - Business Registry Certificate or any other document certifying that the applicant is registered as a legal entity in (country) as of January 2024.

5.4.2 USE OF AI

BIRN evaluates proposals on an applicant's ability to articulate their own ideas: story investigation plan, editorial judgment, and voice as a journalist, which cannot be assessed if the application is generated or drafted by AI tools that produce generic, unspecific, and unverified content. AI may be used only for minor editing (grammar, spelling) or translation where English is not the applicant's first language; using AI to develop, draft, or write any part of the application is not permitted. Applications found to be AI-generated or AI-drafted will be disqualified or receive a lower evaluation score.



5.4.3. APPLICATION DEADLINE

The applicant must submit the application by **12 October 2026, midnight, CET**.

Applications submitted after the deadline will not be considered for funding. The deadline applies to all parts of your application, including supporting documentation.

5.4.4. CLARIFICATIONS, QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Info session is an integral part of this Call for Application and will be conducted online in the English language. During the info session, the Call for Applications and Application Form will be explained and questions answered. **The info session will be organized on September 7, 2026 at 14:00 (CET)**. You can register for the info session [HERE](#).

Additionally, questions about the Call for Application and Application Form may be sent in English language to the BE Tool Coordinator at the email address: karla.junicic@birnnetwork.org until the [deadline for clarifications](#) has passed.

5.5 EVALUATION AND SELECTION PROCESS

All received proposals will go through the following three steps:

1. [Administrative and eligibility check by BIRN](#) to ensure applicants followed the application procedure set in the [Application Form](#), according to the [eligibility criteria](#) and submitted all required documents by the [deadline](#).
2. [Evaluation by the international independent jury](#).
3. [Notification of the application outcome](#).

STEP 1: BIRN ADMINISTRATIVE AND ELIGIBILITY CHECK

BIRN will undertake administrative checks to ensure the applicants have followed application procedures and submitted all the required documents. If any requested information/document is missing or incorrect, the application may be rejected and will not be evaluated further. Any rejected application will be replaced by the next best-placed application on the reserve list that falls within the available budget for this Call for Applications.

An application that passes the administrative check will be assessed further as part of the [evaluation by the independent international jury](#).

STEP 2: EVALUATION BY THE INTERNATIONAL INDEPENDENT JURY

After the call is closed, all applications that meet the administrative requirements and eligibility criteria will be subject to evaluation by an international jury. A jury consisting of media professionals, acting independently, will assess the proposals based on their Relevance of the Proposed Story, Capacity, Financial Proposal and Potential, including the Social impact.

Please refer to the criteria list for further information on quality assessment.



CRITERIA	MAXIMUM SCORE
1. RELEVANCE OF THE PROPOSED STORY - The proposed story tackles an issue relevant to national / regional / local communities in the case of individual grants. - The proposed story tackles an issue relevant to communities in Balkan and Visegrad countries in the case of collaborative grants. - The proposed story has investigative and in-depth potential. - The proposed story contains specific cross-cutting issues, such as the promotion of gender equality, respect of human rights, and marginalised groups. - Originality of idea (please refer to the 5.4.2 Use of AI)	10 points
2. CAPACITY - Applicant demonstrates available capacity within the organisation to implement activities. - Realistic plan to produce the content proposed under the timeline proposed - Applicant demonstrates significant reach in its community. - Applicant demonstrates previous experience in engaging communities. - Risks and challenges are clearly identified and are manageable.	10 points
3. FINANCIAL PROPOSAL The budget demonstrates value for money – the organisation clearly shows it will manage to implement activities according to the proposed amount.	10 points
4. POTENTIAL - The story reflects how the audience-engaged tool will be used to encourage the audience to get involved. - The story proposal addresses problems in particular communities and demonstrates how the community will be engaged. - The media outlet is dedicated to producing meaningful and quality content. - The proposed story will engage new audiences strategically, focusing on underrepresented groups (such as women and girls, younger people, or ethnic, social, sexual, and other minorities).	10 points
MAXIMUM TOTAL SCORE	40 points

STEP 3: NOTIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION OUTCOME

Applicants will be notified of the outcome, whether it was successful or not by e-mail. The applicants will be able to ask for clarifications.

BIRN will also notify applicants about suggestions for teaming up in the collaborative cross-border stories. Notification is conducted during two phases of the evaluation:



- Notification 1: Not passing/passing the administrative and eligibility check
- Notification 2 (final): Selection/non-selection upon the qualitative assessment

Upon positive notification, successful applicants will sign the contract with BIRN and become a recipient of the grant. Successful applicants will receive notification on training dates and programmes.

6. TRAINING AND MENTORING

Following the signing of a contractual agreement by both parties, participants will undergo comprehensive training and be assigned a mentor.

Training

A **four-day online training programme** is mandatory for all project participants. Each media outlet will choose at least three participants to follow the training programme. The training curriculum, established by BIRN, will provide journalists and project participants with an in-depth understanding of the audience-engaged tool and its various features, as well as teach them how to effectively engage their audience in reporting and create high-quality and valuable journalistic reports. Towards the end of the training programme, the participating journalists will be expected to plan and develop their proposed stories for implementation.

Mentoring

After the training, media outlets will continue to collaborate with mentors to create a provisional **activity plan** that will be further confirmed. Access to the BE tool will be established. Throughout the project, BIRN mentors will be available to provide **guidance and support** to the participating media outlets, while respecting editorial independence.

7. TIMELINE OF CALL ACTIVITIES

The following is the indicative table of the application, evaluation, notification process and online training:

ACTIVITY	DATE
Call for Applications issued	3 August 2026
Information Session	7 September 2026 at 14:00 CET
Deadline for Requesting Clarifications	5 October 2026
Deadline for Submission of Applications	12 October 2026 at midnight CET
Notification to Rejected Applicants on the Results of the Administrative Check	23 October 2026
Notification to Applicants on the Results of the Qualitative Assessment	13 November 2026
Contract Signature & Online Training	1 - 4 December 2026

