



STORIES AT RISK



INTRODUCTION

Stories at Risk: Cultural Diversity, Democracy and Debate on Screen is a European consultation and Think Tank initiative developed by Seriesly Berlin, made possible with the support of the Council of Europe's Culture on Screen Programme. The project examines how political, economic, platform-driven, editorial, regulatory and reputational pressures shape the development, commissioning, production and circulation of European series. Its central concern is the relationship between creative freedom, cultural diversity, market dynamics and democratic dialogue.

European series are shaped by a convergence of pressures: fragile public funding systems, the growing influence of global platforms, the rise of right-wing forces, and increasing political and corporate intervention in editorial processes. These dynamics encourage risk-averse commissioning, favouring standardised and internationally marketable content over culturally specific, diverse, and critical storytelling—even as the sector is expected to reflect the complexity of European societies and support democratic dialogue. This report asks how creative freedom, cultural diversity, political and market pressure interact in practice and what it would take to safeguard stories at risk.

This report draws on two phases: an anonymous online survey of 105 professionals across 25 countries (17 July–10 August 2026), and four online Think Tank sessions held afterwards (24–28 August 2026) with 13 professionals across 12 countries who had indicated their interest in participating as part of the survey, including invited broadcasters and commissioners largely absent from the original sample. The Think Tanks tested and deepened the survey's findings, and both phases are treated in the remainder of this introduction as complementary evidence.

HOW ARE STORIES PUT AT RISK?

Pressure on European series rarely takes the form of outright refusal or censorship. It operates upstream and informally: in financing decisions, in early development notes, in what commissioners anticipate audiences or funders will accept, shaping which stories get made and whose perspectives reach the screen well before any formal gatekeeping moment. A large majority of survey respondents (83%) perceive this structural pressure as having intensified over the past five years, while only 8% feel the current production environment rewards creative risk-taking.

The Think Tank sessions that followed confirmed the mechanism, not just the perception: participants described market logic itself as not politically neutral, with untested assumptions about audience demand pushing commissioning toward safe, proven formats, and named underfunded development, not production, as the stage where this pressure is actually decided. Both phases converge on the same remedy: sustained, more independent funding at the development stage, paired with greater editorial trust and independence from broadcaster and commissioner control.



WHOSE STORIES ARE MOST AT RISK?

One third of respondents named political and dissenting voices as most at risk, the largest single category, followed by ethnic, racial and national minorities, then gender (with a striking recurrence of stories about older women), migration, socio-economic disadvantage, and regional and linguistic peripheries. Personally, pressure is felt earliest and most often around money: funding-related pressure is the most widely experienced form (64%), concentrated at financing (31%) and development (27%) rather than production (7%) or distribution. It is severe enough to kill projects outright: 62% report a story that did not move forward, most often through explicit refusal to fund or commission (63%) rather than a later edit, clustering around migrant, queer, racial-minority, and religious material; politically and geopolitically sensitive subjects often described as effectively undiscussable; right-wing extremism, where institutions avoid taking a side; and critiques of corporate power, where funding is withdrawn for other stated reasons.

WHAT WOULD FIX IT?

Across both phases, there were myriad proposals. Many converge on money, trust, and structural diversification. For instance, respondents want to see more funding protected from political and budget cycles, and more dedicated funding for underrepresented and non-mainstream work that is less dependent on project sales and is extended through development and distribution, for instance, through a European development fund. On representation, asks move beyond mere representation to sustained efforts in education, development, and commitment that give underrepresented voices the tools to author their own stories as well as support the realization of their projects. The cultural shift that is being asked for is that there needs to be more trust in the form of greater editorial and creative independence from broadcaster and commissioner control and the market pressures they are subject to.

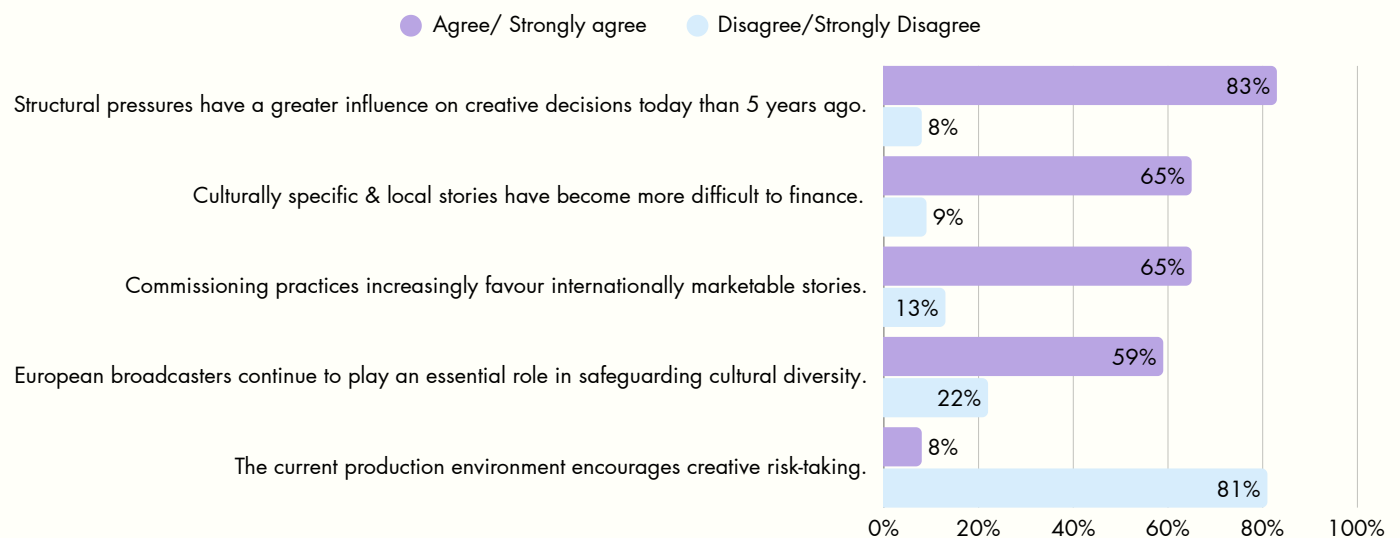
SURVEY METHODOLOGY & RESPONDENTS

The online survey was circulated between 17 July and 10 August 2026 and received 105 completed responses. The questionnaire consisted of demographic and professional profiling, five statements on the current climate of European series production, questions on respondents' personal experiences of pressure or restriction, stakeholder-specific modules, and two open-ended policy questions. To deepen the analysis, the survey included open text fields that were coded and qualitatively analysed to better understand what and whose stories are at risk, how pressure is exerted, and what is needed to safeguard cultural diversity, creative freedom, and innovative storytelling in European Series. The sample exhibits substantial industry experience (42% more than 20 years and 28% 10- 20 years), is equally distributed in terms of gender and half of respondents identified as belonging to one or more underrepresented or historically marginalised groups (among those: 36% Migrant or refugee; 34% Ethnic, racial, cultural minority; 27% Socio- economically disadvantaged; 27% LGBTQIA+; 22% Living or working in an underrepresented region; 15% Disability). Respondents were from 25 European countries, while Germany was overrepresented (42%) followed by France (8%), and Spain (6%). The three main stakeholder groups were writers/screenwriters (53%), producers (20%), and directors (15%).



PERCEPTIONS OF THE CURRENT CLIMATE OF EUROPEAN SERIES

To assess the current state of European series production, the respondents were given five statements to be rated on a five-point agree/disagree scale. The table below shows the share of who agreed or strongly agreed to the statement. The pattern is stark: respondents overwhelmingly perceive rising structural pressure and a narrowing of commissioning toward internationally marketable content, while confidence that the current production environment rewards creative risk-taking is close to nonexistent (8% agreement; 81% disagreement). Trust that broadcasters still safeguard cultural diversity is more divided (59% agreement; 22% disagreement), suggesting they are seen as a weakened rather than absent safeguard.



WHOSE STORIES ARE AT RISK?

We asked respondents to state, in their own words, whose stories or perspectives they believe are currently most at risk of not being told in European Series. We then clustered the narrative responses into common themes:

1. POLITICAL & DISSENTING VOICES

One-third of respondents identified dissenting stories, including anti-right-wing critiques; stories critical of governments, institutions, and geopolitical conflicts; and stories perceived as too left-leaning.

3. GENDER

There was a striking occurrence of stories on older women, as well as women's stories in general, particularly those with female authorship.

5. SOCIO-ECONOMIC & CLASS

This cluster had stories dealing with class & socioeconomic disadvantages, framed either through class and poverty or softer framings like disadvantaged or 'ordinary' people.

2. ETHNIC & RACIAL MINORITIES

The second-largest cluster focused on ethnic, racial, and national minorities, to others specifying stories centering people of color, Roma and Sinti, and intersectional identities.

4. MIGRATION

Stories on migration were another set of responses, especially refugees, but also second-generation immigrants and the question of who tells the story and how.

6. REGIONAL AND PERIPHERAL

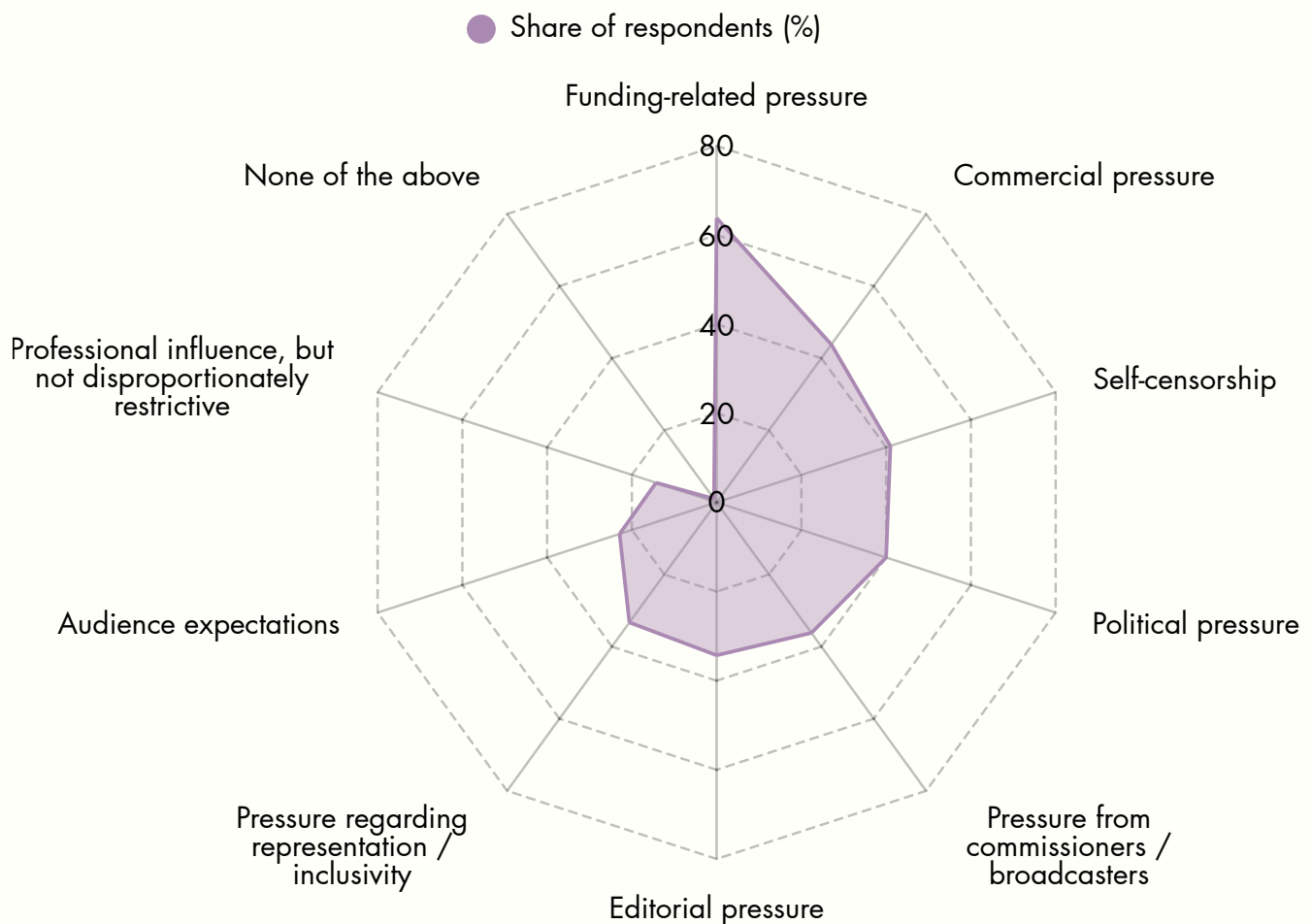
Stories named here were Eastern European perspectives, geographic and linguistic peripheries, and other specific regional identities.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF PRESSURE



How do professionals in the European audiovisual sector experience pressure within their own creative practice? Respondents were asked which forms of pressure they had personally encountered over the past five years and which had the greatest impact.

Funding-related pressure is the most widely experienced form (64% of respondents), followed by commercial pressure (44%), self-censorship (41%), political pressure (40%), pressure from commissioners and broadcasters (36%), editorial pressure (34%), pressure regarding representation and inclusivity (33%), and audience expectations (23%); only 14% reported no disproportionate professional influence.



Asked which had the greatest impact, respondents named funding most often (29%), followed by platform and broadcaster strategies (16%) and editorial pressure (13%). These pressures concentrate at the earliest stages: 31% located disproportionate restriction at financing and 27% at story development, against only 7% for production and under 2% for festival/market selection or distribution.

Taken together, this pattern confirms the hypothesis that pressure is exhibited less through explicit censorship, but more indirectly through funding-related, commercial and political pressures that trickle down to the earliest stages of the creation process, from markets to broadcasters, to producers and directors, and finally to writers.



STORIES THAT DID NOT MOVE FORWARD

A majority of respondents (62%) reported a story or project that was not moved forward due to experienced or anticipated resistance beyond the scope of ordinary editorial collaboration. Among those, explicit rejection or refusal to fund or commission was most common (63%), followed by a requirement to “soften” the story (38%), informal discouragement before formal submission (39%), and audience- or market-framed concerns (33%).

We asked the respondents two open-text narrative questions that we then clustered into overlapping themes: What was the story or theme, and what kind of resistance did you anticipate or encounter? If the story was changed, rather than dropped entirely, what did it turn into? What was removed, softened, or added?

1

IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION

The largest cluster showed resistance to marginalized elements themselves: migrant stories were softened, rejected due to the ‘current political climate,’ or whitened; female protagonists were deemed too violent, old, or specific; queer stories were made ‘less queer’ by adding straight characters; racial-minority stories were dropped or stereotyped for white audiences; and religious stories were discontinued as ‘too sensitive’ or potentially offensive.

2

POLITICAL AND STATE-RELATED

The second-largest cluster split into four recognizable currents: diffuse, unspecified political anxiety; explicit criticism of governments or state institutions; historical subject matter that reopens national wounds; and active geopolitical conflicts such as the Middle East or Ukraine, which respondents described as effectively undiscussable. Often the pressure came in steps: first a request to tone down criticism, then a demand to cut it entirely once softening wasn't enough.

3

RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM AS SUBJECT

A small but consistent cluster where resistance came from institutions trying not to be seen taking a side, not from disagreeing with the story itself. Broadcast editors were described as risk-averse, passing that risk on to freelance creators rather than taking it on themselves. Several of these projects never got a clear yes or no; they just stayed stuck.

4

CRITIQUE OF CORPORATE POWER

A small cluster, but with some of the most detailed stories in the dataset. Here, no one argued with the critique directly. Projects lost funding through other stated reasons, like legal risk or low audience interest, while the actual concern was never addressed. In several cases, participants felt these explanations functioned as indirect ways of avoiding politically or socially sensitive content without explicitly acknowledging it.



STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON CREATIVE FREEDOM

The stakeholder-specific questions provide a more detailed understanding of how structural pressures are experienced across different professional roles within the European series ecosystem. The analysis focuses on writers (56 responses), producers (21 responses), and directors (16 responses), as these three groups generated sufficient response rates for meaningful interpretation. Each of the stakeholder groups received four questions that were similar yet adjusted to their specific role in the creation process. It included one open-text question asking what would strengthen creative freedom for the specific stakeholder group.

Writers: 45% reported that a viewpoint, theme, or character in their work had been removed, softened, or altered for political, social, or commercial reasons often or very often, and 84% had at some point decided not to develop a story at all because they assumed it would be difficult to commission or finance, a sign that pressure operates through anticipation as much as direct rejection. 72% of respondents indicated a politically sensitive or controversial subject matter as a trigger of that anticipation, followed by critical portrayal of institutions (45%), formally or stylistically unconventional work (38%), themes related to minority representation or identity (36%), and stories seen as “too local” or not internationally marketable (32%). Asked what would most strengthen their creative freedom, writers most often called for more funding (especially more independent and direct development funding), greater trust and courage from producers and commissioning editors, more direct access to broadcasters without agents or producers as intermediaries, and openness to political or challenging material, along with targeted funding for newcomers and marginalised creators.

Directors: 44% reported disproportionate removal or softening often or very often, and 56% had adjusted their approach to a story, through casting, staging, tone, or interpretation, in anticipation of difficulty getting approved. Asked what would most strengthen their creative freedom, directors most often called for larger and more sustainable funding paired with less broadcaster say over creative decisions, independent commissions, and financiers willing to back original voices and take greater creative risks. A smaller cluster asked for more diverse and less nationally bounded decision-making in who awards funding.

Producers: The highest rate of disproportionate alteration a project was reported among producers compared to the other stakeholder groups, with 52%. Asked what had the greatest influence on their development decisions, 71% pointed to financing, well ahead of broadcaster requirements (38%), platform requirements and political or social sensitivities (33% each), and market potential (24%). The same number of respondents had been asked to change a project because of its subject matter as those who hadn't. Asked what would most strengthen creative freedom, producers most often called for more and earlier development funding paired with a less risk-averse funding environment, greater transparency and independence in funding and commissioning structures, and, in several responses, more equal treatment and support for marginalised and newcomer producers specifically.



HOW TO PROTECT STORIES AT RISK?

The last section of the survey posed two open-text questions: In your opinion, what should be the highest priority for strengthening creative freedom and cultural diversity in European series? If you could recommend one concrete action to European policymakers and industry leaders, what would it be? The two responses per participant were coded together and clustered into the following policy recommendations:

FUNDING & FINANCING (36 RESPONSES)

Three distinct asks sit inside the call for more funding : direct funding to individual writers and creators who cannot survive on development pay, public funding that is protected from political cycles and budget cuts rather than simply expanded, and funding specifically for diverse or non-mainstream work.

DIVERSITY, INCLUSION & REPRESENTATION (34 RESPONSES)

The second-largest theme, split roughly a third to enforceable structural change, such as quotas, dedicated funds, or more diverse decision-makers, and two-thirds to a broader cultural shift.

EDITORIAL & CREATIVE INDEPENDENCE (19 RESPONSES)

Calls to reduce institutional control over content rather than to increase funding for it. This splits between reducing broadcaster or platform say over creative decisions and a broader appeal to trust creatives and protect risk-taking and uncomfortable stories.

TALENT DEVELOPMENT & NEWCOMER ACCESS (14 RESPONSES)

A distinct ask from general funding, focused specifically on who gets a first chance. Several respondents explicitly contrasted this with current funding patterns that recycle the same small pool of established names.

PAN-EUROPEAN & CROSS- BORDER COLLABORATION (11 RESPONSES)

Calls for stronger cooperation across national industries, shared distribution infrastructure, and centralised or EU-wide funding rather than funding fragmented by individual countries.



AUDIENCE TRUST & CREATIVE RISK-TAKING (10 RESPONSES)

A cluster distinct from funding, asking decision-makers to trust audiences with more challenging material rather than defaulting to safe, proven formulas.

PLATFORM & US DOMINANCE (9 RESPONSES)

Several respondents linked the market power of non-European streaming platforms directly to the survey's central concern, framing it not just as an economic problem but as an additional, unaccountable layer of gatekeeping on top of domestic commissioning structures. One respondent proposed taxing US platform profits to fund local production.

CORPORATE & MARKET CONTROL (9 RESPONSES)

Calls to limit media ownership concentration and reduce the influence of commercial executives over content decisions.

DEVELOPMENT-STAGE INVESTMENT (8 RESPONSES)

Several of the most detailed and structurally precise responses in the entire section converged on the same claim, that resistance operates earliest and most decisively at the development stage, and that this is the stage current funding structures most chronically underfund.

REGIONAL AND GEOGRAPHIC EQUITY (7 RESPONSES)

Calls for support directed specifically at smaller countries and underrepresented regions, particularly Eastern and Southern Europe, which current funding and festival structures were seen to overlook.



THINK TANKS: AN IN-DEPTH LOOK ON STORIES AT RISK

The findings above draw on 105 survey responses. To test and deepen the insights, we ran four online think tanks from 24–28 August 2026 with thirteen professionals, moderated by Roosa Toivonen, Hugo Rosák, Thomas Gammeltoft, and Susanne Skoovgaard. The participants across twelve countries included writers, producers, broadcaster and platform commissioners, a film commission representative, and a festival programmer. While nine had completed the original survey and indicated interest in participating in the Think Tanks, four commissioner voices were added separately, since commissioners made up only one of the original survey respondents. The conversations were transcribed and then qualitatively analysed. Here are the main takeaways:

1. MARKET LOGICS ARE NOT POLITICALLY NEUTRAL AND INCREASINGLY PUT STORIES AT RISK

Many participants feel an ever-growing push towards safer, mainstream, and sellable content. As commercial channels and platforms demonstrate how well it performs, public broadcasters and commissioners are under pressure to produce commercial series appealing to the largest possible audience, while navigating the tension with their obligation to political education and democracy. With fewer buyers, projects often must tick every commercial box, leading to commercial genre work in terms of content and form. Risk is mitigated by producing stories that worked before, leading to uniformity and repetition. Writers feel this acutely, incentivized to develop sellable stories, while commissioners in turn observe the stories they receive as safe and polished. Participants noted that perceived market demand, even when not grounded in robust evidence, deeply shapes creative decisions away from cultural diversity, representation, critique, and formal experimentation, showing how the market is not politically neutral and often veils political considerations behind economic ones.

2. THE POLITICAL SHIFT TOWARDS THE FAR-RIGHT CENSORS LEADS TO ANTICIPATORY CENSORSHIP

In countries like France, the industry is bracing for a far-right takeover of power, and in anticipation, queer and racialized characters are already being removed out of concerns over future salability and repercussions. The more a broadcaster's funding is tied to election cycles, the more serious the threat. Participants also called for separating funding decisions from political cycles altogether, arguing that an industry working on multi-year timelines cannot function if funding shifts with every election. Some participants highlighted that this varies by country and by how much a given right-wing party is willing or able to influence content. Right-wing extremism and migration as subject matter are actively avoided, especially near real political events, leading stories to be further fictionalized and softened. Growing concentration of the market into powerful media companies, often with owners leaning right, compounds this. Participants called for genuine diversification, more funders and companies, so a story blocked in one place still has somewhere else to go.



3. CULTURAL DIVERSITY IS NOT MERELY ABOUT REPRESENTATION ON SCREEN

Participants stressed that visible diversity in casting is not the same as genuine representation, since a story can look diverse while still being told from a narrow, unexamined perspective. What matters more is who authors the story and how they see their subjects; crew diversity requirements were described as often producing diverse casting within otherwise conventional stories, not different stories. This extends to age: participants warned that stories about and by people over 35, especially women, risk falling between youth-oriented and diversity-oriented strategies, and even genuinely diverse projects can be softened during editing as producers anticipate audience reception.

Participants were clear this requires sustained education, not casting or workshops alone. Short, one-off workshops were repeatedly called insufficient; several called instead for multi-week programs giving underrepresented voices the tools to author their own stories. The same logic extends to form: unconventional formats were praised for matching story to structure rather than defaulting to convention, suggesting formal experimentation deserves the same attention as subject matter. In the smallest industries, the real barrier is often not resistance to diverse stories but a shortage of voices who've had the training to reach a commissionable level.

4. DEVELOPMENT FUNDING REMAINS THE SINGLE GREATEST POINT OF FAILURE

Across all sessions, participants named underfunded development as the most consistent, structurally precise diagnosis, more decisive than production-stage shortfalls. Even large broadcasters described lacking any real development funding mechanism, leaving writers to produce extensive early material largely unpaid. Current grants were also criticized as failing in practice; money meant to buy writers time is often unusable, since recipients cannot always afford to step away from other work. Proposed fixes varied: a guaranteed income for writers decoupled from sales, a salaried development hub replacing one-off grants, and a levy on streaming platforms feeding a shared European fund. Others argued for funding early development even where a project isn't produced, since the experience compounds toward future work, and for extending funding into distribution so a finished story actually reaches the audience it concerns.

5. FOR SMALL COUNTRIES, THE TERMS OF CO-PRODUCTION OFTEN DETERMINE WHOSE STORY SURVIVES

Participants from smaller markets described co-production as rarely optional, with its terms shaping the resulting story. Producers often bear the first financial risk alone to prove a concept before international partners engage, and partner size proves decisive: a much larger partner can shift a story toward their perspective. In contrast, similarly sized partners tend to stay balanced. Stories about minority communities face extra scrutiny in this context, having to justify that a project isn't actively exploiting hardship for drama. Resistance often surfaces at a different stage than expected: subject matter cleared domestically instead meets friction at the point of international sale, and political instability compounds this further downstream; one finished project was left in limbo after its broadcaster changed ownership under a new government. Participants proposed a more active role for the European Broadcasting Union in brokering pan-European co-productions too large for one broadcaster alone, reworking funding models that currently require one lead country to front an application, and building a European streaming platform able to play the role US-American platforms play for their own content.



OUTLOOK

Stories at Risk should be understood as a starting point rather than an endpoint. The project has surfaced structural questions around creative freedom, cultural diversity and storytelling that no single stakeholder group can resolve alone. What is required is a continued and sustained dialogue across the European series ecosystem around how to tackle some of the issues this report identified.

CONTINUED CROSS SECTOR DIALOGUE

One of the most valuable elements of the Think Tanks was bringing creators, producers, commissioners, broadcasters and other industry stakeholders into a shared conversation. This exchange should not end with the project's conclusion but be brought into a more permanent and sustainable format, potentially as a recurring European dialogue or forum, so that the different professional realities presented in the Think Tanks remain in contact with one another and continue to exchange knowledge, build trust, and work on solutions to safeguard cultural diversity and creative freedom in European series today and in the future.

FROM DIAGNOSIS TOWARDS CONCRETE ACTIONS

The next step is to move from the report's diagnosis and proposed solutions to concrete actions that could be taken to tackle the problems outlined by the participants of Stories at Risk. Future work could, in greater detail, explore how some of the strongest findings particularly the need for more sustained and independent development funding, greater editorial trust, and room for creative risk-taking—could be translated into practical mechanisms or pilot initiatives, rather than remaining at the level of identified problems.

MONITOR DEVELOPMENTS OVER TIME

The consultation offers only a snapshot of the situation in the summer of 2026. Repeating or revisiting parts of the research over time would enable a longitudinal tracking of how the conditions for creative freedom and cultural diversity develop over time, and whether the pressures identified here intensify, ease, or shift in character. Given the political uncertainty that stems from increasing influence of right-wing forces, it is of paramount importance to closely monitor these developments and exchange experiences and knowledge across countries, industries, and stakeholder groups.

STRENGTHEN THE EUROPEAN DIMENSION

There is a need to explore opportunities for stronger cross-border development, financing and distribution structures—particularly for smaller markets, underrepresented regions and stories that struggle to find support within individual national systems.

MAINTAIN A MULTI-STAKEHOLDER APPROACH

Creative freedom should not be framed as a conflict between creators on one side and commissioners or funders on the other; the Think Tanks demonstrated the value of bringing different professional realities and perspectives into the same room, and that value would be lost if the conversation hardened into opposing camps.

Ultimately, the question this project raises is less about how individual stories at risk can be protected, and more about how European industry structures can ensure that taking creative, cultural and political risks remains possible in the first place.

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The design and implementation of the project was generously supported by Thomas Gammeltoft and Susanne Skovgaard (European Writers Club).

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USt-ID: DE362883540

Funding acknowledgment

This report was developed as part of Stories at Risk: Cultural Diversity, Democracy and Debate on Screen, a Seriesly Berlin initiative made possible with the support of the **Council of Europe's Culture on Screen Programme**. The views, findings, and recommendations expressed in this report are those of the survey and Think Tank participants and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Council of Europe.

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Publication date

15 September 2026