Public Media Alliance

Position Paper

Response to the SBC Initiative

February 2026

Introduction

The Public Media Alliance (PMA) is the largest global association of public media organisations, with a primary role to support and advocate for the core values of public service media.

PMA has a well-established international reputation for its unique insight into public service media (PSM) worldwide through our reports, research, engagement with our members, consultations with media stakeholders, and projects. We represent over 50 member organisations, from six continents. PMA is regularly called upon to submit evidence to government consultations and inquiries. Through our advocacy work, we emphasise that a true public service media entity – regardless of where it is – must abide by a set of key values, including editorial and organisational independence, a secure source of public funding, quality journalism, impartiality, universal reach, accessibility, and crucially, accountability first and foremost to the public. We believe that these values – when protected, emboldened, and ensured – are what make PSM among the most trusted media outlets, and allow them to fulfil their role to inform and underpin democracy.

In April 2025, PMA submitted a response to the consultation on the Preliminary Draft of the Federal Act on the Relief Package 2027 regarding the funding of the international services of public broadcaster SRG SSR. This time, the PMA Secretariat is writing a statement ahead of the 8 March 2026 vote in Switzerland on the initiative to cut the licence fee for public media, to express our opposition to this initiative.

It is PMA's position that the proposal known as the "SBC Initiative" – which calls for the capping of the household media licence at CHF 200 and an exemption for all companies from the fee – would be devastating for public service media and for Swiss citizens, costing potentially thousands of jobs, a severe weakening of information integrity, harmful for media pluralism, and damaging to Switzerland's diverse and unique cultural landscape. In addition, the Swiss Federal Council has already pursued a reduction of the licence fee from CHF 335 down to CHF 300, and expanded exemptions for smaller firms. Further, the Swiss Federal Council has also recommended that voters reject the CHF 200 cap.

If passed into law, the initiative would impose a structural reduction that undermines the public value citizens and residents expect from public service media. It would result in reduced access to reliable information for democratic participation, minimised cultural expression across all language regions, and a media ecosystem less resilient to market shocks and information disorder.

Below, PMA sets out the reasons we believe the initiative's rejection matters, not as an abstract institutional debate or one simply about what households and businesses might save, but on the principle of SRG SSR's contribution to cohesion and democratic participation in a multilingual federation; for Switzerland's cultural production ecosystem and jobs; for the public

Title image credit: SRG/SSR

broadcaster's ability to modernise and stay relevant as audiences shift; and for long-term sustainability of trusted public media in Switzerland.

For transparency, it should be noted that SRG SSR is a member of PMA. Larissa M. Bieler, Director SWI swissinfo.ch, is a member of the PMA Board.

An instrument for cohesion

Switzerland's media reality is unique, representing multiple language groups, geographic and economic unevenness, and strong regional identities with very different commercial media incentives. In this context, public service media is one of the few instruments designed to guarantee equitable and universal journalistic, informational and educational services across all language regions, even where commercial return is limited. This reality is apparent in the Federal Council's own reasoning for rejecting the SBC initiative.

The CHF 200 cap is advertised as a means of "trimming waste". However, it would force SRG SSR into the permanent defensive position of fighting for survival, resulting in reduced capacity first where revenue is hardest to replace, such as with local reporting, investigative journalism, and coverage that serves smaller or more remote communities. For regions outside the largest centres, the initiative would hit particularly hard and reduce the quality and breadth of information available to citizens there.

This will have serious implications for democracy. Switzerland's direct democracy system relies on citizens having access to consistent, trusted, widely available information across the whole federation; this is particularly relevant during election periods, cantonal debates, and referendums. If SRG SSR – the only broadcaster mandated and resourced to serve the entire country and its national languages at scale – is structurally reduced, this would not simply "leave space" for private media, as supporters of the initiative suggest. Instead, it risks creating information gaps and news deserts that commercial actors either may not fill or may fill unevenly, because the business case is weaker in those areas that most need inclusion. It further risks these gaps being filled by cheaper content, thinner reporting, and, in many cases, by global platform dynamics that prioritise speed, outrage, and virality over verification and context. This initiative is therefore more than a budget matter and is rather a governance choice about whether Switzerland maintains a baseline of universal service journalism, in all languages and regions, or allows that baseline to erode.

Furthermore, SRG SSR, as a trusted and well-resourced news provider, also contributes to Switzerland's information sovereignty in an era of disinformation campaigns. This reflects a wider global debate, where PSM is increasingly seen as critical infrastructure and a resilience asset for democratic and national security.

Finally, PMA is concerned about the precedent a "yes" vote sends in a time when trust and cohesion are under pressure in many democracies. The Swiss

debate is being watched well beyond Switzerland, and a decision to deliberately weaken universal-service public media, after years of incremental cuts, risks normalising the idea that public-interest information is discretionary rather than a core democratic necessity.

Culture and jobs are part of the public value

SRG SSR's public value is also cultural, and includes commissions, co-productions, music and performance ecosystems, and the infrastructure that allows Swiss stories to be made and seen across its national languages and beyond. PMA supports arguments by cultural groups that a halving of SRG SSR's resources would jeopardise Switzerland's cultural diversity and cohesion due to the dependence of many Swiss productions on public service commissioning and investment. There is a valid fear that the likely substitution would not be the nurturing of domestic production but rather the purchasing of cheaper imported formats or international series. Cultural associations have warned precisely about this displacement: fewer resources for telling Swiss stories, and a drift toward cheap acquisitions that may satisfy airtime but hollow out national cultural production capacity.

Meanwhile, jobs are an important consideration as well, not only within SRG SSR but throughout the production chain, including freelance journalists, the independent production sector, crews, regional creative industries, and suppliers. The public discussion around the initiative has repeatedly flagged large employment impacts associated with deep reductions. Planned cuts already pose a major challenge, with the public broadcaster expecting to see a reduction of CHF270 million in its annual budget from 2029 and up to 900 full-time jobs could be cut. SRG SSR has warned that once funding is removed, it does not return, and the effects will spill beyond the broadcaster into the wider Swiss media and cultural system – for instance, generational renewal could be impacted in the form of reduced pathways for early-career journalists and creators to develop skills in public-interest reporting, regional storytelling, and multilingual production.

It also puts Swiss collaboration with partners in doubt. RTS, SRG SSR's French language unit, works closely with French-speaking public service media, while SRF, its German language unit, with German-speaking PSM. A severe cut would weaken SRG SSR's participation and visibility on the European stage.

The wrong solution to audience shifts

Supporters of the initiative argue that SRG SSR's content is reaching fewer people, especially younger audiences who increasingly prefer platforms like YouTube and streaming services, and therefore the fee should be reduced. However, PMA views this as flawed logic. Audience fragmentation is not evidence that public service media is obsolete, but rather it is evidence that

the information environment has become more competitive, more global, and more shaped by platform incentives. We believe that democracies benefit from well-funded trusted institutions that can prioritise public interest over engagement-maximisation. A halving of the licence fee would only diminish SRG SSR's potential to adapt to reach these audiences.

Furthermore, if the goal is relevance to younger audiences, the rational response is to enable SRG SSR's modernisation instead of leading it to obscurity and irrelevance. Undoubtedly, this is a time of profound disruption to the media market, but this only exacerbates the need for well-resourced public media, able to invest in digital distribution, new formats, accessibility, and audience-focused innovation, while maintaining the editorial standards that differentiate public service content from platform-driven information flows. A severe funding contraction does the opposite and would force the public broadcaster to retreat into short-term survival measures, reduce its innovation capacity, and make it harder to compete for talent, rights, and production quality in the very spaces where younger audiences are spending time.

PMA also cautions against confusing the symptoms with the cause. If public media is less visible among younger audiences, it may be because these audiences spend more time in platform-based environments where discovery is shaped by algorithms and creator economies rather than by public-interest mandates. Weakening public media funding in response rewards that attention economy, and reduces the capacity of Swiss public media to remain present, relevant and competitive in the spaces where young audiences are.

Meanwhile, the common argument surrounding public media – "why pay if I don't watch?" –ignores the question of fairness. PSM is a universal-service model, not a subscription product, designed to ensure that everyone can access reliable information (especially at times of crisis) and culturally relevant content, including people who might not be able to pay for multiple private subscriptions or who live in areas where private provision is thinner. Usage patterns should inform strategy, not justify dismantling universal access.

Future-proofing matters

One of the least discussed but most structurally damaging elements is the initiative's proposal to cap total licence fee revenues, so that growth in household numbers would trigger a corresponding downward adjustment of the fee to keep revenue within the ceiling. This mechanism represents an ongoing constraint that makes long-term planning and sustainability materially harder.

Costs for a media organisation, whether public or private, do not stand still. Even with good governance and efficiency, journalism, technology, rights, and distribution costs often change upwards, while the threat landscape, such as mis- and disinformation, foreign influence, and crisis coverage demands, also evolves. A revenue cap that prevents the funding base from adapting to

changing conditions risks turning public service media into a shrinking institution in a growing and more complex market.

It may also create a situation where, when revenue cannot respond to growth, the public broadcaster may be pushed towards internal rationing and prioritisation, issues that can become politicised. This is especially sensitive in multilingual systems where fairness in resource allocation is essential to legitimacy. While the initiative may state that distribution across language regions should not change, a shrinking pie makes those distribution choices more contentious and more likely to be framed as zero-sum.

Furthermore, the cap risks undermining SRG SSR's strategic and global competitiveness with domestic media providers and global platforms alike. If SRG SSR is structurally prevented from maintaining investment capacity, Switzerland risks losing not only content volume but also the quality and innovation required to remain visible and trusted in a crowded environment.

In summary

In summary, the Public Media Alliance makes its case on the following points:

1. PMA opposes the initiative because it weakens a core democratic utility: universal-service public media that reaches all language regions with trusted, accurate and reliable content that supports informed societal and democratic participation.
2. The cultural and employment effects are integral to Switzerland's cultural diversity and cohesion and to the creative economy that depends on public service commissioning.
3. Audience shifts demand capacity to modernise and invest, instead of a structural funding shock that accelerates retreat and irrelevance.
4. The initiative's revenue cap establishes a system of long-term decline by restricting SRG SSR's ability to adapt to evolving markets, costs, and risks.