

Ensuring the Safety of Journalists: a constant battle

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Dr Václav Štětka, Loughborough University

Thank you to the organizers for the invitation to this webinar, it is a pleasure to be in such a distinguished company – if only virtually – and to be able to discuss this important topic of journalistic safety. In my short intervention I will focus on the situation in Central and Eastern Europe and draw on examples from this region, which is the region that I not only come from but I have also been studying for a long time as media and communication scholar, most recently as part of the project called [The Illiberal Turn](#) that I have been carrying out together with our team at Loughborough University.

As all of you know very well, the working conditions for journalists in Central and Eastern Europe have been progressively deteriorating, mainly as a result of the worsening economic situation especially in print media sector, but also due to increasing political pressures and attempts to curb media freedom and autonomy by political actors as well as local proprietors or oligarchs. We have been observing these trends for some time already, but they have been arguably exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that has brought even further challenges for the media, both in terms of their economic situation as well as in terms of additional restrictions on the press imposed by the governments.

Unfortunately, the pandemic has also brought significant rise of online threats and harassment of journalists. There have been reports from various countries in the region of journalists receiving unprecedented amount of abuse following their reporting on the pandemic, especially from the so-called anti-vaxxers and Covid-denialists who have been growing stronger and getting louder with every new wave of the pandemic. Many of these messages involve death threats. However, they are coming not just from the angry online mob. Last year there was an incident in Slovenia involving a well-known investigative journalist Blaz Zgaga who was subject of massive amount of online abuse and death threats following his freedom of information request concerning the government's handling of the pandemic; and this campaign against him was apparently orchestrated by the government, whose PM Janez Janša has been known for frequent attacking of journalists and making derogatory comments about them (he is by far not alone in that – other illiberal political leaders, such as Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán or the Czech PM Andrej Babiš have been frequently smearing journalists too). And it is not just online harassment – this atmosphere of hostility which is obviously fuelled by the pandemic can translate into threats and abuse in the offline world. These are the experiences of many journalists who share stories of being harassed and intimidated on the streets, and especially when doing their jobs. Again, one

recent story to illustrate this comes from Slovenia where the Covid protesters broke into the building of the Slovenian public service broadcaster RTV in September this year, trying to occupy the main newsroom.

In other countries things are even worse; in Serbia, journalists have been physically attacked by the police when covering anti-government protests in July last year, and others were arrested for allegedly spreading panic or not complying with Covid rules, when in fact they were just doing their jobs and reporting on matters of public interest.

So in light of the rising incidence of these kinds of cases and stories, the initiative by the European Commission that we are discussing today has to be certainly welcomed, as it comes at a critical time for journalist in Central and Eastern Europe. I just wanted to make a couple of remarks, based on the outcomes from our project, that relate to the general context of journalists' work, and how the perception of their work may contribute towards this atmosphere of hostility that has a direct impact on journalists' safety.

We have recently published a report titled "[Rebuilding trust and countering polarization in \(post\)pandemic times](#)" that contains recommendations for media policies and journalistic practices, drawing on the research we carried out in four Central and Eastern European countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Serbia.

One of the lessons learned from the project that I hope is relevant for this discussion is that the roots of hostility towards journalists is in the lack of trust (which has been notoriously very low in Central and Eastern Europe), and the reason for the lack of trust is both the low level of media independence and high level of political and media polarization that translates into very partisan media consumption habits. In other words, the existing and gradually deepening polarization that obviously pre-dates the arrival of the pandemic creates an atmosphere which emboldens people to abuse and harass journalists, especially if they are perceived as being allied with "the other side", so to speak. And although the independent and oppositional media and journalists are most often the victims of this tendency, it has negative consequences for the state-affiliated media too, which is particularly palpable during a health crisis; we know from our data that people in countries with tighter state control of the media (such as Hungary or Poland) had a greater tendency to distrust pandemic-related information if it was coming from state television, regardless whether the information itself was accurate or not.

What I am trying to say is that the current levels of hostility against journalists in Central and Eastern Europe that ever more often results in endangering their safety has not appeared overnight, but has been years in the making, by systematic erosion of independence and trust in media, and by growing societal polarization, which has been speeding up under the illiberal governments. This also means that while the Commission's recommendations to enhance mechanisms for protection and ensuring the safety of journalists are very much needed and I am sure they will be appreciated by media practitioners in those countries,

they clearly deal with the consequences of those above mentioned tendencies, like declining independence and trust, and rising polarization, rather than with some of the deep-rooted conditions fuelling those trends as such. This is why in our report we have formulated some practical recommendations aimed at increasing media trust and tempering polarization, which we feel is a responsibility of both policy makers and regulators, as well as news organizations themselves. As there is not enough time to go through all of them here, I am going to mention just a few for illustration.

First, we believe it is very important to take steps in the direction of **strengthening impartiality and professionalism in news media reporting**. Because contrary to what seems to be a widely held opinion about the contemporary tastes of news audiences, we have detected in our research a general discontent with what they perceived as an overtly opinionated style of reporting, and expressed a wish for a more neutral, fact-oriented way of providing news by journalists. In other words, we think this trend towards partisan and opinionated journalism might be at least partially supply-driven, and that there might be more appreciation for the values of impartiality, fairness and accuracy in news production than what currently meets the eye.

Also, to temper polarization, we believe that media organizations, journalistic associations and other professional bodies should develop internal codes of practice and/or **guidance on how best to avoid fuelling polarization in news media reporting and journalistic conduct**, especially in relation to language and style of reporting, e.g. by avoiding language that demonizes the “other side”, or by choosing a human interest perspective on polarizing topics.

Obviously, it was already mentioned that many of the current woes of the news media industry and journalistic profession stem from the dire economic situation that the whole sector is in, and that is double the case in Central and Eastern Europe. As we believe that the path towards more trust and also higher quality of news reporting (including more space given to investigative journalism) leads through improving basic economic conditions that the media currently operate in, and so one of our recommendations indeed is that governments as well as the EU should **foster an economically enabling environment** for the media, including transparent programmes for their economic support.

We know, sadly from first-hand experience in many CEE countries, that losing economic independence very often leads to losing political independence, which then frequently leads to losing trust by the audiences. It is reassuring that the Commission is clearly aware of that, and the actual document that we are discussing, makes a specific reference to the issue of economic and social protection of journalists. This is something I find inspiring, as it indicates that the Commission is willing to encourage member states to step beyond the measures that prevent from direct threats to journalists protection and safety, and also emphasize the need to deal with the material reality and often precarious nature of journalists’ work which also has significant implications for their well-being.