

MÉRTÉK MEDIA MONITOR

Four Shades of Censorship **FREEDOM AND SOCIAL ROLE OF JOURNALISTS** in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia



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and Slovakia**



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INTRODUCTION

In each country, we conducted structured interviews with at least 10 journalists based on a pre-defined set of questions. Journalists participated anonymously in the research, except in Slovakia. In selecting the journalists, we sought to cover as much as possible the diversity of the media system in each country, both in terms of ideology and type of media.

During the interviews, the following questions were asked, naturally adapted to the specificities of the interview situation:

- 1.a. *How do you assess the social role/ social roles of the journalists in your country?*
- 1.b. *How do you assess the reputation of journalists in your country?*
2. *Which are the top three positive and the top three negative characteristics of journalism in your country?*
- 3.a. *Do you consider that journalists in your country are facing challenges that are impeding their work?*
- 3.b. *What are the most serious work challenges that journalists are facing in your country?*
- 4.a. *Do you consider that the daily working conditions of the journalists in Western countries, comparing to the ones in your country, are better or worse? Give 2-3 reasons!*
- 4.b. *What are the most important changes in your working conditions in the last five years?*
5. *How do you assess the current state of press freedom in your country?*
- 6.a. *In a dynamic perspective, how has changed the state of press freedom in the last five years?*
- 6.b. *And which were the main changes of the state of press freedom since you have been working as a journalist (if working for longer than 5 years)?*
7. *What are the top 3-4 components of press freedom for you?*
- 8.a. *Did you personally experience political and/or economic pressure on your work in the last two years? Yes/ No*

- 8.b. What does “pressure” mean for you?
- 8.c. Describe here 1-2 such examples from your experiences!
- 9.a. Do you think that the economic situation of your media outlet (media company) depends on the political environment? Yes/ No
- 9.b. How does the political environment influence the economic situation of your media company?
- 9.c. In your assessment, how can politics and the political leaders influence the economic situation of media companies in your country?
10. In your assessment, is it possible to create and maintain a sustainable business model for pursuing journalism in current public issues?
- 11.a. In your opinion, does the legal framework of journalism play a determining role in your work, and in the function of your media company?
- 11.b. Is it a rather positive or negative role?
- 11.c. Have you ever decided not to publish something because of the unpredictable legal consequences?
- 12.a. In the last two years, have you decided not to publish or distort any information to avoid existential or economic consequences?
- 12.b. Have you heard about such situations from your colleagues?

- In all countries, there has been self-criticism that more and more journalists are becoming activists, which is hampering the many functions of journalism.
- Self-censorship is a well-known phenomenon in all countries. If not the respondents themselves, other journalists they know are reported to have withheld information in the past in order to avoid negative consequences.

Overall, despite the difficulties, Czech and Slovak journalists have a much more positive perception of their own situation and their role in society than their Hungarian and Romanian counterparts. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, respondents do not feel that there is a systemic lack of transparency in the work of journalists. Hungarian and Romanian colleagues, on the other hand, have a fundamentally dark and pessimistic view of the situation.

Key lessons from the interviews:

- A recurring element of the conditions that make journalism difficult is the ownership of the media, the presence of oligarchs (media moguls), i.e., owners with strong political connections and motivations, which was mentioned by respondents in all countries.
- Among the threats to the freedom and quality of journalism, economic instability and low levels of financial dignity are recurrent. In particular, Hungarian and Romanian journalists mentioned the role of public funding and its distorting effect on publicity.
- It was also reported in all countries that journalists are increasingly verbally attacked, including by leading politicians. Difficulties in access to public information were the most frequently mentioned by Romanian journalists during the interviews, but this problem is also a problem for Hungarian journalism.
- Economic difficulties and political pressure have also motivated positive changes. The spread of crowdfunding and the launch of innovative independent projects could help the democratic development of these media systems in the long term.
- Journalists in all countries perceive their own social image as rather poor. In addition to the general, but varying degrees of political pressure on the media, they believe that the specific characteristics of digital media also play a role. In this media environment, it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain journalistic credibility among the many sources of information, and journalists themselves are being forced to adapt to this environment at the expense of professional standards.



CZECH REPUBLIC

RESPONDENTS' CHARACTERISTICS

- C1 *Journalist working for a local daily owned by an oligarch.*
- C2 *Former top manager, manager of content and journalist working for a publishing house owned by a local businessman.*
- C3 *Journalist working for a media industry website.*
- C4 *Editor-in-Chief of business daily - owned by a Czech businessman, former business journalist.*
- C5 *Journalist working for a daily owned by PM Andrej Babiš.*
- C6 *Former Editor-in-Chief of several dailies, currently a founder and Editor-in-Chief of an independent news website.*
- C7 *Former Editor-in-Chief of several dailies, currently a founder and Editor-in-Chief of an independent media outlet.*
- C8 *Former journalists for several newsrooms, currently Editor-In-Chief of an independent journalists platform.*
- C9 *Former Editor-in-Chief of several weeklies and a daily, currently Editor-in-Chief of a publication owns by a Czech oligarch.*
- C10 *Reporter at a national radio station.*
- C11 *Former media top manager who worked for different media outlets.*
- C12 *Producer and a host at the public television.*
- C13 *Investigative journalist working now on a news online platform owned by a local businessman.*

1a) How do you assess the social role / social roles of the journalists in the Czech Republic?

Majority of respondents answered that the social role is very important as journalists are still bringing information about the government's failures and scandals but is getting worse and worse. "The main reason is the change of political climate and the change of media ownership aka oligarchisation of media sector." Moreover, general public has become cynical.

"The social role of journalists is not as good as in Germany, but not so bad such as in Hungary."

Journalists in the Czech Republic belong to the middle class - the lower-middle class. Two respondents mentioned an interesting phenomenon - a couple of Czech journalists has become influencers. They are active on social media, they do have hundreds of thousands followers and they are influencing public opinions directly.

1b) How do you assess the reputation of journalists in your country?

The reputation of Czech journalists is very bad and markedly deteriorated, answered majority of respondents.

"15 years ago, the reputation was much better. The reasons of the worsening? Partly because of the media ownership shift, partly because of our own journalistic failures."

Respondents are also mentioning that the journalistic profession is being undermined by politicians as well. President Miloš Zeman and PM Andrej Babiš are showing hostility towards journalists - they are using verbal attacks, improper jokes, both refuse the admission for some journalists to their press conferences or reject to answer their questions. Just to remind: during a press conference in 2017, President Zeman "welcomed" journalists holding a mock assault rifle with an inscription with read "toward journalists." In May 2017, he was speaking with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin when the microphone caught him ironically saying that journalists should be "liquidated" as there are "too many" of them.

Five respondents pointed out the public opinion researches: trust in journalists and journalism in general is decreasing. On the list of trust in professions, journalists are among the least trusted professions as same as politicians. Similar results shows the list of least appreciated professions.

"Journalists are next to housecleaners and politicians as for the least appreciated professions. It speaks for itself."

2) Which are the top three positive and the top three negative characteristics of journalism in your country?

One journalist describes the state of media in the Czech Republic:

"If you compare the situation with Eastern countries where dictatorships rule, the situation is better in the Czech Republic. Compared to Western Europe: the Czech media sector is deeply influenced by commercial interests of its owners and other factors: e.g. due to 40 years of communism, we do not have a tradition of independent journalism,

therefore there is nothing to build on. Compared to other Central European countries: we are relatively the best among them, as state media regulation and political pressures on journalists are not as huge in the Czech Republic as they are for instance in Hungary or Poland."

2a) Top three positive characteristics

It is very interesting that when asking respondents about positive characteristics of Czech journalism, they do have problems to name some of them (to name the negative ones was much easier for them). Nearly each journalist has different answers and quotes more-less unique characteristics. Therefore we listed the 3 of them that were mentioned more than once, and below the line we are quoting other answers that might be interesting for the whole grant research:

1. START OF NEW INDEPENDENT PROJECTS (3/13 RESPONDENTS) - respondents mentioned as very positive that oligarchisation of Czech media and the entry of Andrej Babiš into politics and media business brought new independent projects on the scene in last few years - those projects are totally independent of political and economic interests and are being owned and run by journalist themselves. Another positive characteristic that goes hands in hands with this is the crowdfunding activity - thus is general public supporting those new independent projects.
2. INFLUENT AND INDEPENDENT PSM (2/13) *"PSM position, even if eroded and under pressure from politicians' side, is very strong. People do trust them and PSM are still broadcasting the investigative reportages that are critical to the government."*
3. TRYING FOR OBJECTIVITY (2/13) According to respondents, media is a proper ante-dote of political power and offers opinions' diversity. On the other hand, one journalist mentioned a paradox: *"The better part of Czech journalism is constantly trying to balance their opinions. As a result, it is often uniform. The worse part of Czech journalism will sell more examples because it is unbalanced."*

Apart from above mentioned three characteristics, the responded journalists mentioned as well: desire to preserve democratic values by majority of media, pro-Western orientation, historical memory before 1989, relative freedom, formats' diversity.

2b) Top three negative characteristics

It was much easier for journalists to define the main negative issues that are characteristic for Czech journalism:

1. OLIGARCHISATION OF MEDIA (the most often mentioned answer - 5/13 respondents). *"Political and business interests of media owners are interfering into media and journalism in general." "A key part of the media market is in hands of a company that belongs to the prime minister. It is not important what the newspapers write, but especially what they do not write and thus deflect the public debate."* One respondent said that Czech media market is too big thanks to the oligarchs because they are artificially keeping alive non-viable media because of their own political or business interests.
2. LACK OF FUNDING (4/13 respondents): *"Media sector is in recession since 2008." "We are missing viable business model of journalism."*

3. ACTIVISM and ACTIVISTIC JOURNALISTS (3/13 respondents). One journalist quoted: *"There is too much mainstream and too little out of mainstream. Majority of news outlets are left-wing, nothing is right-wing."*

Apart from above mentioned 3 characteristics, the responded journalists mentioned as well: declining quality of news and "flatness", relatively small insight into covered problematics and lack of erudition and experience of journalists.

3a) Do you consider that journalists in your country are facing challenges that are impeding their work?

Yes (11/13 respondents answered YES)

No (2/13 respondents answered NO)

3b) What are the most serious work challenges that journalists are facing in your country?

- media oligarchization and media ownership in general ("The very specific economic and political interests of media owners are the main obstacles."),
- advertisers' and owners' pressure and effort to influence content and politicians are trying to negatively influence media as in Hungary and Poland and PSM under pressure,
- economic un-sustainability and media funding and economic conditions in general (low salaries, working for small independent publishing houses where employee comfort and earnings are lower than in traditional big publishing houses),
- intimidation and defamation of journalists ("When Czech president comments several times per year that journalists are prostitutes, so it becomes anchored in the public - see the example of Trump in the USA."),
- self-censorship (For many people - especially the young ones - the tying factor is a mortgage. They do not want to go to more risky actions, they suffer from self-censorship. Moreover, young people have different priorities than investigative journalism. Lifestyle journalism predominates."),
- corruption and unhealthy relations between business and government,
- fake news (there are as many as 40 pro-Kremlin „alternative“ websites that operate in the country),
- social media boom (everybody is a journalist now and to get info is much easier than before),
- coronavirus - distinction between working in an office and working from home is blurred,
- to defend the essential space for critical journalism.

4a) Do you consider that the daily working conditions of the journalists in Western countries, comparing to the ones in your country, are

BETTER (10/13)

10 out of 13 respondents answered that the daily working conditions of the journalists in Western countries are better comparing to the ones in the Czech Republic.

GIVE 3 REASONS

The responded journalists mentioned different reasons why the conditions in Western countries are better and explained what Czech journalists are facing up to

- journalists in the Czech Republic have less time for news coverage and nearly no time for in-depth journalism,
- Czech media is under-funded and under-invested, lack of finance, financial background in Western countries is much better and more solid,
- Czech journalists are facing huge pressures from owners who have their own political and business interests,
- Czech journalists are operating on a very small language market,
- the most dangerous factor that is fatally worsening the working condition is the oligarchic ownership structure of media that totally eliminated the presence of traditional western publishers and media houses at the Czech market,
- we are missing publishing culture, there is a lack of journalistic tradition (because of the 40 years under communism regime),
- the advertising market is much more cultivated in Western countries, in the Czech Republic the advertisers try to make pressure on media,
- the Western media are able to be based on subscription model, that is still something new for the Czech Republic where the general public is still not willing to pay for information,
- the management of big publishing houses owned by oligarchs is unprofessional and inexperienced and its main mission it to be able to fulfil the owners wishes,
- political pressure.

WORSE (0/13)

0 out of 13 respondents answered that the daily working conditions of the journalists in Western countries are better comparing to the ones in the Czech Republic.

THE SAME (3/13)

3 out of 13 respondents answered that the daily working conditions of the journalists in Western countries are better comparing to the ones in the Czech Republic.

I DON'T KNOW (0/13)

4b) What are the most important changes in your working conditions in the last five years?

Summary: Majority of respondents answered that they can see the changes in their working conditions, only two of them cannot see any changes.

New technologies and entry of internet

Speaking about the most important changes, the most often mentioned (7/13) ones were connected with the entry of internet into media sector, new technologies and social media. New technologies are helping with journalistic work, journalists can react much more flexible thanks to mobile phones. Social media has changed the work as well. There are few new celebrities, that means journalists who are influencing public opinion. On the other hand, "there is too much democratization of public debate thanks to social media" and everyone can express their opinions of bring information without any verification.

"I am much more oriented on web now (web first, mobile first) and trying to find the key of a viable business model. I am assessing journalists according to PVs and article performances in general."

"Now we have new technologies, new technics, new search tools, however it is more complicated and harder to verify information."

Under-investment and financial pressure

Similarly, often (6/13) were the answers connected with financial issues. Journalists were mentioning constant financing pressures - under-investments and pressures from owner's side. The media houses have been constantly cutting costs and there are less and less funds for journalistic work.

"I have experienced deteriorating of my income - a very significant decline. I do not earn 200K CZK that I used to (working as editor-in-chief in big media company owned by foreign owner), but 35K CZK. I had to build a brand new platform to be able to do my work."

More work, less time

Four journalists mentioned constant working pressures. They have to produce more articles for less time. There is less time for in-depth analyses as well and therefore you can find more surface information in media.

Political pressure

Two journalists mentioned the harsh behaviour of politicians from the majority of political spectre (president, PM, government, some extremist parties etc.) and their attacks on independent critical journalism.

"We are not allowed to participate on press conferences of Czech PM Andrej Babiš, as we are critical towards him."

5) How do you assess the current state of press freedom in your country?

Surprisingly, a majority of respondents (9/13) said that the level of press freedom in the Czech Republic is satisfying and quite high despite the threats from Andrej Babiš and other oligarchs. They argument that if you compare the situation in our country to the rest of Visegrad countries, the Czech Republic is much better. You can still find different opinions' sources and the market is wide enough to get free information and there is a

plenty of small independent new media outlets. Moreover, the efforts to "nationalize" public service media are - thanks god - still unfulfilled and unsuccessful. One journalist however pointed out that within each media house, you can find different level of press freedom according to different interest groups - e.g. there is no press freedom in Mafra publishing house that belongs to the trust fund of Czech PM Andrej Babiš. Another one thinks that press freedom is being affected mainly by economic situation as a whole - lack of ads, lack of funding etc. - rather than oligarchs.

Of course, answers differed based on the type of media respondents work for. The fact that the majority of respondents said they do not see the situation of press freedom so critical may be explained by the fact that while those who work for oligarchs are ashamed to confess the fact they are not free, others are not under such pressure.

"There is not a problem with press freedom, but with economic confidence and ignorance from establishment side. Media is the barking dog who does not bite."

"Relatively high. I do not feel any limits in what I am speaking of and writing about. Journalist can publish whatever he wants without a fear of any repression."

"If you take international reports - we are not in such a bad situation like in Hungary, but we are in a much worse situation than the whole Western Europe."

One respondent thinks that we are on average as for press freedom. 3 journalists out of 13 are not so positive and they answered that there is a very bad press freedom in the Czech Republic. One respondent mentioned that out of 100 percent there is 20 percent of press freedom in our country. If you have taken respected media organizations, they are ranking the Czech Republic at around 40th place in global press freedom index. In 90th years, we were around 20th place. It speaks for itself.

"We are less free, the media market has totally changed and there are many journalists who are NOT willing to work for oligarch media structures."

6a) In a dynamic perspective, how has changed the state of press freedom in the last five years?

When speaking about the change of the state of press freedom in our country in the last five years, 8 out of 13 journalists admit that media freedom is much worse now than it used to be and that the changes are very intensive and quick.

"It has been awful continually for the last 5 years."

The most often mentioned argument for this quotes is the oligarchisation of Czech media: the entry of Andrej Babiš into media business (2013) started the departure of traditional foreign (mostly German) publishers and "boarding" of local oligarchs with political ambitions and financial interests who lack any publishing culture and experience. It is the beginning of so called oligarchisation: strong concentration of power in oligarchs hands. Media owners and government are interconnected (new owners have a business with state as well) and it causes subsequent weakening of media independence. PM Andrej Babiš, who owns media through his trust fund, is the key player. By acquiring two key dailies (MF Dnes and Lidové noviny), he eliminated the independence of them and is controlling news agenda in the country and worsening communication opportunities for democratic parties as well.

Also other new owners are not ashamed to push their business and political interests. Moreover, there is much intensive pressure on PSM than ever before. The journalists in general are facing verbal attacks and intimidation more often.

Some respondents mentioned self-censorship as well. According to them, there is a higher self-censorship among journalists as they are afraid to lose their jobs.

However, 3 out of 13 respondents think that the situation is not so bad and one doesn't know the answer. One journalist said that as for him the situation is more or less the same since the fall of communism in 1989. Another one added: *"It is not much worse, as we still belong to the free world. Nobody kills journalists here."*

6b) And which were the main changes of the state of press freedom since you have been working as a journalist (if working for longer than 5 years)?

Majority of respondents - no matter the media type - mentioned that the entry of Andrej Babiš into the media business shortly before he entered politics and total media ownership changes that followed were the main changes of press freedom.

Andrej Babiš enters publishing company Mafra in 2013, taking over two crucial liberal daily newspapers, traditional independent foreign publishing groups left the market and media are acquired by Czech oligarchs with political ambitions and financial interests who lack publishing culture and media business is not their core business but a tool how to push their interests.

"The main changes? Ownership structure - traditional independent foreign publishing groups are gone, the Czech media market is being oligarchised, our current PM Andrej Babiš is owning the majority of media market."

"Ownership of media - the publishing business it is not the core business of new media owners."

"The entry of Andrej Babiš into media business (2013)."

"Being a journalist: first 15 years, the situation got better and better - dubious media with dubious owners disappeared. Around 2010, the situation was pretty stable. Since 2013, it is getting worse and worse because of the owners changes."

"Changes are absolutely dramatic. I started to work as journalist before the Velvet Revolution in underground. And now I am back in underground."

"Departure of renowned publishers from Czech Republic."

"After the Velvet Revolution, journalists were full of excitement and there was a strong ethos of free journalism. Now - many journalists are only 'producers of letters and paragraphs' without any integrity."

"Mafra acquisition of Andrej Babiš just before he entered politics."

One journalist mentioned another huge factor which is Google - Facebook duopoly and its impact on digital advertising landscape. Google and Facebook take 80% of all digital ad spendings and it hit traditional ad-supported media—broadcast television, radio, newspapers and magazines—the hardest.

"The entry of Andrej Babiš into media business and oligarchisation of media. The most important challenge for media is however the existence of Google-Facebook duopoly"

that is "eating" the lion's share of digital advertising all around the world and thus de facto killing the media revenue model. This is the main reason why there are nearly no self-funded media projects in our country and it leads to oligarchisation then."

Only two journalists - one from a daily owned by PM Andrej Babiš and one a reporter of a national radio station - answered that they cannot see any significant changes.

"I can't see no significant changes. In contrary, as for actual press freedom, it is better now. I can see only one huge obstacle - self-censorship of journalists which is connected with economic situation and new media owners."

"The situation is the same since the fall of communism in 1989."

7) What are the top 3-4 components of press freedom for you?

Respondents offer a different range of answers when describing the main components of press freedom. The freedom to express opinions and provide information without pressure from the side of owners and without political pressures or interference was mentioned most often. No censorship - the interests of owners or advertisers are not reflected and the journalists might choose the topics according to their importance. And such circumstances that do not lead to self-censorship.

Another component being mentioned was the necessity to have access to the leading representatives of the country (the government must not refuse the access to its press conferences to journalists that are critical towards the political representation - which is happening now in the Czech Republic). The possibility to ask whatever you want and the possibility to lean on and being supported by media organisations and journalistic personalities goes hand in hand with the previous component.

Journalists said as well quite often that it is necessary to have enough funds in order to be able to hire excellent journalists and to develop media.

A journalist working for a Czech oligarch says: "Publishers must be economically self-sufficient and must be able to generate enough revenue (especially from readers) in exchange for its products and services to cover all of its expenses. There must be funds for excellent journalists so that he or she is not dragged down by any other corporation from different sectors. Open state administration - open data as much as possible. It is certainly essential that journalists have a good reputation in general so that society trusts them."

"Freedom to spread information and express opinions regardless of the owner and political constellation. Freedom of expression. Sufficient money to enable the development of the media environment."

Former Editor-in-Chief of several dailies, currently a founder and Editor-in-Chief of an independent news website mentioned: "For me it is the possibility to disclose the real state of affairs. If I find out facts that cannot be disclosed to public, then I consider it as a helplessness against lies and impossibility to unmask lies."

Former top manager of several media houses insists: "Freedom has no components, it is a complex, and if it is torn from that complex, it loses its meaning and is not worth dissecting. As for the independence from the owner: as a top manager who represented the owner, I cannot imagine that someone would work in an editorial office and would not agree with its editorial orientation and point of view."

8a) Did you personally experience political and/or economic pressure on your work in the last two years?

Five journalists answered: No. (Respondents who used to work for traditional media outlets and now are heading or working for independent projects mentioned that they are experiencing economic pressure rather than political ones). Answers of our respondents proves that the press freedom situation in the Czech republic is worsening since professional foreign owners disinvested and left the country.

Eight journalists answered: Yes. (Mainly the ones that are working for oligarchs' and big media houses owned by local businessmen, and PSM as well).

"Yes. I've been living in it for seven years and I got used to pressure."

"Yes, it is the same situation as in 1985 during communism regime."

8b) What does "pressure" mean for you?

Journalists mentioned many issues: interference into editorial work from media owners, request to write or not to write something (mainly in case of journalists working for oligarchs), pressure from inside of a company - advertising department namely, compromises towards biggest ad clients, financial pressure, intimidation and physical threats.

"Financial pressure: I need to regularly defend the reason why the media exists."

"Any force that affects the non-disclosing of information so that it does not turn out as it should."

"Request to write or not to write something."

"Pressure is when someone tries to threaten me physically or economically and uses all his tools to harm the newsroom."

"My opinion differs from the views of the media coalition pressure-group and is critical to that."

"I do not mind being offended by representatives of political parties or the president, but by some media that give them support. Journalists are becoming servants of political power." (TV host of an investigative show).

"The worst is when working on a sensitive topic, I meet a crook, and I do not have the support of my own editorial office because my editor-in-chief is afraid of publication and enforces self-censorship." (investigative journalist who has worked for several media outlets).

8c) Describe here 1-2 such examples from your experiences!

"I have not published some piece of information because of the fear of pulling out the advertisements. It is necessary to say that every owner has a potential risk. It is important to be careful what is the significance of information that I do not disclose."

"An economic background and security of free independent journalism and small independent media outlets is reduced to an absolute minimum. As those small independent projects are very often critical to the government, the advertising department

practically cannot function properly in independent media. Why? Potential clients are afraid to advertise here and they fear of revenge from PM, his government and public authorities."

"We don't automatically receive state advertising. As we are a small project and are critical to government."

"Threats of pulling out the advertising. Bribe offer."

"Inclusion of a guest into a broadcast on the basis of a political request and order. Selection and sorting of questions for a given guest."

"A media commission has been formed where people who are either local politicians or people who depend on politicians predominate. And they censor in advance what is to be included into a local magazine. The proceedings of this commission is not public."

"I have experienced several times with a previous employer that some information and opinions concerning PM Andrej Babiš were questioned by my Editor-in-Chief and were not published. For instance the one when I compared Andrej Babiš to Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán."

"The worst experience ever? When one of Czech oligarchs sued me directly for defamation and violation of reputation and a good name. The trial dragged on for three long years (before I won)."

9a) Do you think that the economic situation of your media outlet (media company) depends on the political environment? Yes/No

Nine out of 13 respondents answered that the economic situation of their media outlet depends on the political environment. Among those were all respondents working for independent new online media outlets, for PSM organisations and even ones working for Andrej Babiš and other oligarchs.

"Yes, I don't know a medium which doesn't depend."

Journalist who works for Andrej Babiš adds:

"Yes, but it's not crucial. The decisive factor is the further development in society - content being out on the internet, paywalls etc."

Four out of 13 answered "no". Among them those working for big media houses owned by local businessmen who have some business interests in doing business with Czech government (except of one).

"We are a commercial subject."

"A big advantage - our owner is not dependent on government procurements and is dependent on his own business. "

9b) How does the political environment influence the economic situation of your media company?

The most often answer was: yes, a lot. As for respondents who work for Czech oligarchs and local businessmen, they mentioned that their owners are doing business with state and/or are profiting from state advertising because Czech state is still a large financier. Such media outlets have the access to press conferences of Czech President, PM and other ministries (only limited numbers of journalists is now allowed to participate - it is said that because of COVID rules, the small and independent ones are totally ruled out).

"Yes, randomly, our owner is doing business with the state and is involved in criminal cases abroad."

"Quite significantly: we have the access to state advertising, to information and to press conferences of our government."

"It causes that multinational digital giants to gain dominant power by not being regulated."

On the other hand, small and independent media projects insisted that state offices are bullying them and refusing to give access to state advertising as they are critical to Czech government. Moreover, this situation is discouraging the commercial advertisers as well - as they do have fear of a revenge of tax offices for instance. (Nevertheless it is fair to say that there is not any case known that such a pressure as controls from tax offices or other governmental bodies was used against independent media.) Thus, the current government with PM Andrej Babiš is creating an atmosphere in which the advertising model for small independent media outlets cannot function. But there is one positive factor as well:

"If there was not such a political environment, there would be no demand to read us," said one of the representatives of new independent projects.

"The current political environment creates such an atmosphere in which the advertising business cannot function for small and independent projects that are critical to Andrej Babiš and offer investigative journalism. Moreover, some people who could be potential donors are afraid that they can draw the attention of the tax office and a potential revenge."

Last, but not least – PSM organisations. Both respondents replied that neither Czech TV nor Czech Radio are dependent on state advertising. But politicians can significantly influence the functioning of PSM. First, Chamber of Deputies are electing the members of their supervisory bodies - Czech TV Council and Czech Radio Council. Moreover, Czech deputies are setting the Radio and Television licence fees that are a crucial revenue stream for PSM and they are deciding the laws concerning the deduction the VAT for PSM. At the beginning of June 2021, Chamber of Deputies canceled the possibility for media of public service to deduct the VAT. Thus, public broadcasters cannot claim VAT back on goods and services to the same degree as commercial radio and TV stations. Czech TV calculates that this change will cost it up to 400 mil CZK (15 mil €) per year and Czech Radio 120 mil CZK (4.5 mil. €) per year.

(Explanation: In 2018 Czech government implemented the change of the law which cancels the possibility for media of public service to deduct the VAT. This possibility was implemented for PSM the previous year to give them the same possibilities as commercial media have. Thus, public broadcasters could claim VAT back on goods and services to the same degree as commercial radio and TV stations. Government explained the cancellation of VAT deduction for PSM by the EU regulations which according the government doesn't allow it and that the amendment will end a discrepancy between Czech law and European Union legislation. However, the Czech Television chief said the amendment breached a principle agreed with the government under which it was to invest savings

made on VAT into the station's shift into DVB-T2 digital broadcasting until the year 2021. The CEO of Czech TV said that if the government did not offer some form of compensation the change would impact Czech TV's digitalization process and asked the Czech PM to support him and to proceed with the deduction of value added tax after 2021. Czech TV calculated that this change will cost it up to 400 mil CZK (15 mil €) per year and Czech Radio 120 mil CZK (4.5 mil. € per year.)

9c) In your assessment, how can politics and the political leaders influence the economic situation of media companies in your country?

The answers were more less similar to the answers 9B) above. To sum it up once more: politics and political leaders influence the economic situation in Czech Republic through state advertising, through introductory of regulatory measures - taxes, sanctions, fees, laws going against media, through donations, subventions, and state aid, through providing information only to some media.

"They can enforce Google and Facebook regulation."

"They can introduce regulatory measures - taxes, sanctions, laws that go against the media (through licence fees) and they can direct state advertising only to the media who has a friendly approach towards them."

"Czech government supplies state advertising to the media of PM Andrej Babiš. Independent ones are being totally neglected."

"There is no coincidence that no state aid is given to support the media. It can be affected by state advertising and EU subventions as well - not surprisingly, it heads only to some media and the ones who are not neutral and friendly towards the government are excluded."

"This is done through the advertising of state-owned enterprises which are sent to specific media outlets - namely Mafra that is owned by PM Andrej Babiš. Conversely, there is a ban on state advertising into alternative media."

"No coronavirus subsidies."

"There were attempts to abuse the covid situation by placing a large amount of state advertising to support Czech tourism - intended mainly to support the oligarchic media."

10) In your assessment, is it possible to create and maintain a sustainable business model for pursuing journalism in current public issues?

All 13 respondents answered yes with few explanations. They think that it is possible but only for a few entities and in general cannot see a sustainable model for a wide range of competing media outlets. Some respondents pointed out that a sustainable model is viable rather for small projects than mass media and it should be based on a broad support of readers (subscription model, crowd-funding).

"If I knew the answer to this, I would already be a publisher. I can't imagine there wouldn't be a sustainable model. I can't imagine a space without professional information. But the existence of social networks is exactly the reason why the sustainable model has not still been created."

"It is possible to build a journalism on author's writing and with the strong support of the fan base. This is the only way how to compete with oligarchic media that has a bottomless budget."

11a) In your opinion, does the legal framework of journalism play a determining role in your work, and in the function of your media company?

Eleven out of 13 respondents consider that Czech legal framework play a role in their work, but the scale of importance differs according to their answers.

In general, freedom of the press and speech is legally protected by the Czech Constitution, and by the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms respectively. The Press Law (No. 46/2000) provides a solid basis for independent journalism, and media protections have been bolstered by Constitutional Court decisions and other institutional rulings. Freedom of information is provided for under the law. Other important regulations are the Act on Czech Television (No. 483/1991) and the Act on Czech Radio (No.484/1991). Both went into force in 1991 and have been amended several times. They provide councils that control public service media - Czech Radio and Czech TV. The Free Access to Information is guaranteed by the Law No. 106/1999 which nevertheless doesn't give any special rights to journalists concerning access. And responded experts are aware of them.

Quite a few respondents think that legal enforceability is the basis for the functioning of any media. It could be done much more to protect journalists, but the legal framework has no defect, think an owner of one of new independent projects. Two journalists pointed out that the legal framework is quite vague:

"We do have freedom of press, but we do not have for instance the regulation of interests on publishers." Another one adds: "Legal consequences may have a great influence - the potential threat resulting from publishing something is pretty strong. It came with the entry of oligarchs into media who are using it as weapons not only against his business competitors but against journalists that are critical towards them."

An ex-top-manager of different media organizations explained one more thing:

The legal aspect is becoming more and more significant. Czech media space is "americanised". In past, lawyers in media organizations previously acted more less as consultants only. Today, their role is much more important. Publishers show them articles before publishing, ask for legal advice and articles are subsequently adjusted according to their recommendations in order not to face legal consequences.

However, interestingly, two respondents independently mentioned that the legal framework is more comfortable and transparent in Slovak Republic or Romania than in the Czech Republic (one has experience with working in Slovakia, another one has friends in Romanian PSM).

"It plays a very basic role. One cannot publish something that has no importance and something that is missing the factuality of the writer's information and the reliability of his source. In the past, we often laughed about Romania but as far as I know, it is a more transparent environment there today."

11b) Is it a rather positive or negative role?

Five journalists answered that the role of legal framework is quite positive (they pointed out to much worse situation in Eastern Europe - Russia, Hungary, Poland, or argued that the environment is not regulated too much).

Three journalists answered that it is rather negative as it enables the functioning of non-market environment and keeps alive digital giants such as Google and Facebook who are dismantling media business and content model.

One person chose both:

"Positive - it protects publishers against attacks on economic basis. Negative - as for content it gives journalists the straitjacket - they are afraid to bring something that might bring potential legal consequences."

Rest of respondents (7/13) were not able to give their opinion on this matter.

11c) Have you ever decided not to publish something because of the unpredictable legal consequences?

Eleven out of thirteen respondents answered a clear NO. Majority of them argued that if they decided not to publish anything it was not because of the unpredictable legal consequences but only because the article or reportage was not adequately sourced. So they are mentioning that the main obstacle is the lack of the factuality of the writer's information and the reliability of his source.

"When we were on the edge, we asked our legal departments for an analysis, and then we published it anyway."

Two respondents working for local businessmen answered rather yes - but then they added that due to the owners' business interests they decided to adjust the articles.

One person who used to be Editor-in-Chief of several dailies and now is the owner of his own independent media project added one interesting example:

"No, not at all. It is my job to publish important information about the misusing of political power. Thus in past, when I decided to publish something against Andrej Babiš and the previous publisher advised me not to, I finally published it against his will and was forced to leave afterwards. I could have stayed in my position, but only if I had decided not to publish it."

12a) In the last two years, have you decided not to publish or distort any information to avoid existential or economic consequences?

No (9/13)

Yes (4/13)

12b) Have you heard about such situations from your colleagues?

Eleven journalists answered: yes. They mentioned that it is quite common practice in the Czech media not to write against/about their owners' and advertisers' issues. Most often they mentioned the media that belongs to the trust fund of PM Andrej Babiš and its bad journalistic practice - they are serving such as spin doctors of Andrej Babiš: they are totally avoiding or neglecting his scandals and are spinning the situation and publishing some total non-important topics on its cover pages instead of it.

"Journalists do not generally write negatively about matters related to their owners."

"It is an absolutely common practice for most political journalists in our country."

"Yes, it is quite often to adjust and bend information - you know who is your owner and who are your advertisers and either you are not writing about them or you are so "politically correct" in order not to upset them."

13) Are the mainstream media in general in the Czech Republic still the watchdog of democracy and politics?

Seven out of 13 respondents think that mainstream media is still the watchdog of democracy and politics in the Czech Republic but it is harder and harder. Three more answer that only partly.

Respondents mainly mentioned the important role of PSM. There are a couple of investigative programs, debates, breaking news (in comparison to private TV stations). But the situation can change quite quickly. Czech TV Council - body that controls the activities of Czech Television, named by MPs - has started to become the tool of politicians who are trying to enforce their political interests.

As for commercial media - being owned by Andrej Babiš and other oligarchs - the situation is quite opposite. Respondents say that media that belong to Andrej Babiš are totally out of game now. Those media does investigative work only if it concerns opposition to the Andrej Babiš's government and in principle serves as government garniture. In case of its owner Andrej Babiš - his main dailies stay often silent. As one respondent says: the best model is to buy (acquire) the journalists as it happened with journalists under the rule of oligarchs. Some of them got used to it and are writing in accordance with the instruction or guidelines of their owners (censorship, self-censorship).

"Its role is falling. A watchdog is someone who is able to change or influence something. The mainstream media is able to bring down ministers, but on the other hand is unable to do anything with a following issue: there are still people without a security clearance working for the Czech president. Czech intelligence services mistrust President Zeman's office so much that they have denied top security clearance to his chief of staff and to his top military aide."

Three journalists answered that mainstream media is not the watchdog of democracy (one is working for media in the trust fund of Andrej Babiš, one is the owner of the new independent project). One who used to work for a Czech businessmen answered simply: "I never thought they ever were."

14) Can you mention the most significant misusing of media power in last 2 years?

The most often examples of significant misusing of media power in last 2 years were connected with Andrej Babiš who is the owner of several media outlets through his trust fund and thus controls huge parts of crucial media in the Czech Republic, who is the current Czech prime minister, who is the leader of the anti-EU, anti-immigrant and populist ANO party, who is a tycoon suspected of stealing money from the European Union and of having worked as the collaborator with the communist-era secret police.

"Two main dailies owned by Czech PM Andrej Babiš are serving such as spin doctors of Andrej Babiš: they are totally avoiding or neglecting his own scandals and are spinning the situation and publishing some total non-important topics on its cover pages instead of it."

"Dailies belonging to Czech PM are covering problems and scandal of the largest political party ANO, of its members and at the same time of Czech PM as well (he is the leader of ANO)."

"Two main dailies are messengers of Czech PM Andrej Babiš and are able to bring down the politicians according to his will."

"Undoubtedly the abuse of media power by our Prime Minister. He is now the forth richest person in the Czech Republic with the vague resources of his start-up capital. He is the founder and the final beneficent (through his trust fund) of Agrofert group, a conglomerate of more than 250 companies spanning chemicals, agriculture, and media, who has monopoly over some sectors of economy and who is the biggest receiver of EU subventions in Czech Republic. Most importantly: he is controlling huge parts of crucial media in the Czech Republic. As a result and thanks to it, he is still a prime minister."

"If you take the media belonging to the trust fund of Andrej Babiš, it is not about what they write about but rather what they does not write about. Some information is not targeted and thus it distorts a picture of Czech society as a whole. His two dailies are labelling themselves as independent but whenever PM Babiš needs a help, they will help - by publishing or not publishing anything or by spinning the information. The „normalisation“ (term used to control the society after the soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968) of media scene in the Czech Republic applies to commercial televisions and other media outlets which are owned by other oligarchs and have connections with Babiš."

Another respondents mentioned the pressures of their owners and advertisers.

"The most accurate is the definition of what Marek Dospiva said when he acquired the publishing house that publishes 72 local daily newspapers: We need media as a nuclear briefcase to protect ourselves against irrational attacks of other media tycoons. We do not have to use the red button. But it's good to have it."

Last but not least is the problem of fake news and Russian propaganda in the Czech Republic. There are as many as 40 pro-Kremlin „alternative“ websites that operate in the country. They look like a news website: publishing many articles, nobody verifies them. The problem is that journalists from those websites are even being invited into Czech TV and Czech Radio discussions. The counterintelligence service confirms as well that Russia is conducting "an information war" in the Czech Republic and building a network of puppet groups (trolls farms). Moreover, the Czech president is a leader that shows considerable sympathies to Russian interests.

"Russian propaganda is being spread even through some mainstream media. Which are consider as really dangerous."



HUNGARY

RESPONDENTS' CHARACTERISTICS

- H1 Employee of a Budapest-based online news site which is not pro-government*
- H2 Senior employee at a regional online news site*
- H3 Employee of a Budapest-based weekly which is not pro-government*
- H4 Employee of a Budapest-based weekly which is not pro-government*
- H5 Journalist working for a pro-government media outlet*
- H6 Journalist-editor of a staff-owned online political magazine*
- H7 A journalist-producer at a commercial community radio station in Budapest, which has its own newsroom and produces political reports*
- H8 Journalist at a private television channel with many political shows and its own news show*
- H9 Employee at a national online newspaper*
- H10 Employee at a regional/county daily newspaper*

1.a. How do you assess the social role/ social roles of the journalists in (your country)?

The journalists we interviewed assessed – either expressly or implicitly – the actual job they perform against an idealised version of journalism. In this idealised understanding of journalism, the journalist presents and explains reality in an impartial manner, with due distance from the various stakeholders and with an open-minded approach. In the reality of the prevailing political framework, however, they are drawn more intensely into the ongoing political processes. Thus, for example, independent journalism must fill the void created by the elimination of the institutions that had served as the pillars of the rule-of-law.

H2 – The social role that real journalism is expected to play in Hungary today is far greater than what it can actually realistically deliver. On account of the political circumstances, journalists are expected to solve many problems that they were not originally meant to be responsible for.

H3 – Journalists play a very important role in Hungary since there are no checks and balances left to monitor the operations of the state. Hence, without journalists citizens would not find out about important public issues.

Journalists perceive that in combination with their own work conditions, the prevailing political environment and media system make it impossible for them to live up to the idealised vision of journalism that they harbour in their minds. The “increased social role” that journalism has had to assume already marks a shift in the direction of activist journalism, but some of our interview subjects formulated even more stringent criticisms of this situation. The most important among these referred to the problem of partiality in media coverage. This problem was also manifest in the respondents’ comments pointing out that opinion-centred journalism prevails over fact-centred journalism.

H7 – Journalism is incredibly partial. The language it deploys is shoddy, it lacks refinement, and that in itself renders it devoid of seriousness. There is a vast amount of partiality, hierarchies and moral standards are being disrespected, and it is very emotional.

H8 – Journalists, too, play a role in inciting audiences, in sealing them into bubbles and thereby creating and reinforcing parallel realities.

H9 – The majority of readers are no longer merely passive media users but active media producers through social media. This gives rise to a lot of noise in the media, it is full passions and emotions. In this situation, the responsibility of journalists to produce credible, properly reviewed and reliable information may even be greater than previously. Regrettably, what we have seen instead is an even stronger trend in journalism to mix news and opinions, and on the whole this has hurt the credibility and objectivity of the profession.

At the same time, we have also seen a pronounced desire on the part of journalists who are independent or critical of the government to distance themselves from their colleagues who work for pro-government media outlets. The journalists working for independent media typically do not even allow the staff of pro-government media outlets into the professional journalistic communities they are part of.

H4 – The way the role of journalists is perceived depends on the given bubble. They are not seen in the same way in the pro-government segment of the public as compared to the rest of society.

H6 – It depends on whom we classify as journalists. If we only consider those as journalists who use the tools and methods of journalism, then those professionals have an important social mission until such time as the country has ended up going all the way in deconstructing the democratic structure. It is a common misperception, how-

ever, to call propagandists journalists merely because they type letters which are then published on a platform that seems like a newspaper. That in itself does not make them actual journalists.

H7 – The attack-dog media have seen their role appreciate. This category is mainly made up of some newly-created government-friendly propaganda outlets (Pesti Srácok, Magyar Nemzet, 888 etc). These constantly incite their readers and talk about everyone in a degrading manner. And then there are the media outlets that take a traditional approach towards their job, but these struggle with their own problems: lack of money, lack of personnel, and the difficulty in accessing information. Nevertheless, one cannot compare their understanding of the role of journalism with that of the attack-dog media. (...) There are so many scribes for hire out there who make sure to adjust what they write to curry favour with those who are in a strong position politically.

H10 – Some of the journalists have gone into the business of disseminating messages, although some of those who disseminate messages were never actually journalists to begin with. The watchdog function over those who exercise political power is now very limited, there are increasingly few opposition newspapers and critical journalists left to discharge this function. Performing meaningful journalistic work is especially challenging in the rural areas, where it is hard to report in a politically independent manner about the actual problems that everyday folks face.

Those who work for pro-government media are also aware of the contradiction inherent in their position but they typically seek to generalise the problems they face and to project them onto the entire profession of journalism. This is an excellent method of self-exculpation.

H5 – Journalists do not really play a significant role in society, and this is also reflected in their social standing. At the same time, the few who are recognised for their professional work do sometimes play a substantial role in shaping certain social issues.

The answers provided by our respondents show that the scandals uncovered by the media do not give rise to appropriate consequences. The lack of consequences constitutes a significant impediment in the way of realising the envisioned role played by journalists.

H8 – Under the present circumstances, we are limited to playing the role of chronicler, we are people who research and record what is actually going on. But even our investigative work tends to be mostly limited for use in the history books, given that uncovering something does not result in any consequences, our work is a matter of documenting what is happening today for future generations.

1.b. How do you assess the reputation of journalists in your country?

The journalists we interviewed uniformly assessed that the social prestige of journalism is very low. The main reason for the lack of social respect for journalism is the extremely polarised nature of public discourse. A segment of journalists in the Hungarian media sphere do actually serve political interests. Politicians, for their part, do all in their power to ensure that independent journalists and media outlets are labelled as partisan, too, thereby drawing them as well into this polarising logic. The result is that ultimately journalists as well as their audiences are trapped in their own “bubbles”. The narratives proffered by the respective “other side” either fail to break through into the bubble or, when they do so, they are interpreted along the lines dictated by the given bubble. A portion of the responding journalists formulated sharp self-critiques admitting that they cannot escape this polarising logic – in fact, they even end up accommodating it in their work.

H1 – Our prestige has fallen to immeasurable lows. The reason is the degrading tone adopted by governmental actors towards journalism and their refusal to share information, which ends up serving as a model for all of society even as it renders acceptable the notion that the representatives of state institutions have no obligation to inform the public and that they cannot be held to account. That is why media products cannot excel, and that is how “partisan work” is created.

H2 – [The prestige of journalism] has declined continuously over the past 30 years since I have been in this profession. The reason is that a segment of the professionals serve economic and political interests, they have no interest in their profession.

H4 – Journalists fail to live up to the strong expectations in Hungarian society which wants them to contribute to solving problems. This makes them seem like people who distort what they produce to serve one political side or the other, and the impression is that their work does not count for much.

H6 – They are viewed very negatively. Wide swathes of society believe that there is no such thing as a journalist, there are only propagandists. One journalist serves one interest, the other serves another. That is not in fact the case, but the impact of the activities of some propagandists who pretend to be journalists is that those in power can use them to taint and discredit the entire profession. For the most part, this has been accomplished already.

H7 – It’s very bad. When I go someplace and say that I’m a journalist I feel no respect (...) There are many scribes for hire out there who write to serve prevailing political interests. And people are fully aware of this. And they know, too, how worthless the stuff that journalists try to sell them is.

H8 – It’s never been worse than today. And to some extent that’s really justified because journalists are seen as being the same as propagandists – even though propaganda is associated with political marketing rather than journalism, which is based on critical thinking.

H9 – My own personal experience in my everyday work is slightly better than what the research suggests. True enough, I often encounter the reverberations of political tribalism in society, but oftentimes I do not – and the latter is a surprising and positive experience.

The respondents’ answers also reflected on the issue of fake news. For one, audiences are increasingly less likely to distinguish between news sources; contents disseminated by journalists are just a few among the many items of information in the vast mass of information that audiences encounter. This devalues the activities of journalists, placing their contents on the same level with non-professional unverified contents. At the same time, another characteristic aspect of the prevailing Hungarian public discourse is that a politician who is subject to criticism in the media will label the critical media outlet as a disseminator of fake news. This obviously damages the social standing of journalism and exacerbates the divisions in society.

H9 – It is increasingly difficult to tell information stemming from credible and professional journalistic sources apart from deliberately misleading contents or opinions disseminated by ordinary laypersons who argue vehemently for their position. This public sphere, inundated with and diluted by all sorts of information, does not serve to improve the general view in society of journalists.

H10 – An ordinary news consumer does not necessarily have the ability to distinguish the authors and disseminators of fake news from those who do not disseminate fake news. Thus, gradually faith emerges as the only remaining measure of credibility. Those who are on our side write good things, while those on the other side are liars.

H3 – When a governmental figure accuses a journalist of fabricating fake news, they substantially damage the credibility of the journalists working for the given media outlet even though the quality of the work performed by the latter hasn’t actually changed. What happens in such an instance is that a political actor reduces the credibility of journalists in order to serve their own political ends. This is true for governing and opposition parties alike since it is far easier to discredit a journalist in this way than to refute the information they have published.

Journalists also mentioned the weakened ties between their profession and the audiences as one of the reasons behind the low esteem in which journalism is held. This seems to contradict the finding that social media and comment sections create an ongoing interaction between newsrooms and their audiences. Nevertheless, the underlying relationship has lost its personal character, it tends to be superficial and impersonal.

H10 – We no longer have a telephone hotline or a readers’ section where we shared comments and letters to the editors – this used to be the readers’ favourite – and customer services have been closed. There is just not much space for readers and journalists to get to know one another, and I suspect it may have been deliberately planned this way. We need to be replaceable, indistinct, impersonal – people should not want to turn to us with information that could be damaging to anyone’s interests, and they should neither respect nor like us.

2. Which are the top three positive and the top three negative characteristics of journalism in your country?

Among the positive characteristics, several respondents mentioned that quality journalism continues to exist and that the political threats have thus far not resulted in violence.

H3 – The most positive feature of the Hungarian situation is that thus far journalists have not been beaten, jailed or shot. Another positive aspect is that for the time being it remains possible to distribute a newspaper that is not government-friendly (although at the same time the newspaper of the respondent in question could not be printed in Hungary). Yet another positive feature is that readers fund such a newspaper.

H10 – The only positive feature is that they do not jail opposition journalists, although I think that’s pretty basic.

A few other recent developments were also included among the positive features mentioned by the respondents. This included the audience’s growing willingness to pay for contents and increased cooperation between newsrooms. Covid has also led to major changes in the public sphere, with the new public platforms allowing new media players to emerge.

H6 – The readers and viewers now understand that if they want quality content, they have to pay for it, otherwise such contents will simply not be available. And they will pay, too, as long as they can.

H8 – There is an increasing amount of cooperation between the most outstanding journalists and newsrooms. There is no longer a competition for sources and even if you have nothing (materially speaking) you can still become a partner more easily.

H9 – An influx of young journalists, a generational change. The impetus towards bringing in more young people has accelerated and the market absorbs more people.

H7 – There are a lot of female journalists.

The negative features observed by our respondents tend to revolve around the intense politicisation of the media system. These lead to divisions within the journalistic community and make it impossible for the media to fulfil its social function.

H1 – The most unique characteristic of the Hungarian press is that it is not actually a press. What we have in Hungary is a fake press: we have activist newspapers; there are business-oriented media outlets funded by billionaires; and there are those which are funded and maintained by the state. Neither of these comport with the traditional criteria that we apply to the press.

H2 – Journalists who try to engage in those dimensions of political journalism which involve the monitoring of those who hold power, uncovering scandals and making sure that the interests of minorities are publicly aired make up a minority of the profession these days. A large segment of the media today serves the interests of those in power and deploys gross manipulation techniques.

H6 – The public media system operated with hundreds of billions in taxpayer money are not really public media, they are simply partisan propaganda outlets. The media market has been distorted beyond recognition. Government propaganda, controlled from the centre, has taken over and has put an end to the independent existence of over half of the politically relevant Hungarian press.

H7 – Political division, as if we were living in two different countries. A significant portion of the political press has been instrumentalised, 80% are controlled from above and the journalists write what they have been told to write, partly because of censorship and partly because of self-censorship.

It follows from the above that there is a lack of broadly-based professional solidarity and common professional and ethical standards.

H4 – There is no common understanding of journalism. Various newsrooms have different takes on what journalism means, and the line dividing them does not only pit pro-government against non-government media, but the latter, too, are divided on this dimension. A typical feature of this division is that everyone thinks they are better than they really are and think worse of everyone else.

H5 – Journalists have no collegiality; there is no professional community between them.

The division is also manifest in the attitudes of the audiences.

H9 – It's painful to see the depreciation we see in the role of reading and informing oneself. Instead, the trend is going in the direction where people try to push their own opinions while they pay little mind to how well-founded these opinions are.

The respondents also mentioned professional deficiencies. They perceive that the divisions within society have emerged as impediments in the way of effectively accessing market resources.

H7 – [The profession is marked by] highly limited language skills, seclusion, and an effort to continuously whitewash those in power and to point out how well we are doing despite the circumstances.

H9 – Hungarian journalism and the Hungarian media are not properly prepared for tackling the challenges stemming from technological progress, the disadvantages and threats emanating from the vastly increased amount of information in public discourse. This includes, for example, the problem of how difficult it is for readers to distinguish between credible and valid information on the one hand and unverified or false information on the other.

H8 – I don't harbour any hopes that we will have a situation like in Slovakia, where journalism has moved in unison behind a paywall. I'm afraid that quality journalism will become the privilege of the wealthy and educated few, thus even further abandoning the communities torn apart by propaganda. The best of the critical journalists are leaving the profession.

3. What are the most serious work challenges that journalists are facing in your country?

An overwhelming majority of the respondents mentioned access to information as the paramount challenge. The refusal of the state, public institutions and public figures to respond to the queries of journalists jeopardises the quality of the work performed by the media.

H1 – The top challenge is to get official information. A long time ago, journalists could obtain information about public interest issues by drawing on official sources. For the time being, they are forced to rely on semi-official information, on sources that are difficult to verify, which claim to be competent even as their competence is difficult to establish.

H8 – Parliament has become a no-go zone. Public figures do not think they have any obligation to make themselves available for questions.

A problem that was often mentioned in the responses was the intense politicisation of the media through both media owners and journalistic practices. In this environment, investigative work does not result in actual consequences and there is no real solidarity between journalists. Since the law is a political instrument, the threat of legal proceedings against journalism has emerged as a constant problem for journalists.

H2 – Because of the high concentration of pro-government media owners in the market, it is increasingly difficult for journalists to remain active in the profession without being required to render some type of "political service".

H4 – Journalists have come to believe that they need to refute what the government says. That is why the biggest challenge for the Hungarian press is to be relevant rather than merely reactive.

H8 – The facts and information published, the investigative reports do not yield any consequences whatsoever.

H10 – As rural journalists working for a county newspaper there are certain issues that we are not allowed to touch because they could be embarrassing for the governing party or its local representatives. We can't even report them after half the country has

already written about them (and we are being ridiculed for not covering them). There are articles which I believe are written based on orders from above – but at the county daily newspaper I work for they brought their own people in to write these.

H7 – There is very little cooperation and solidarity between journalists. The largest domestic newsroom was destroyed without so much as a real demonstration against its demolition.

H3 – The fear of lawsuits is a major challenge facing journalists and has emerged as a key impediment in the performance of their work.

Many respondents discussed the financial difficulties of media enterprises and the excessive work burden of journalists, how hard it is for them to make ends meet and the problem of burnout.

H6 – Whatever meagre resources they have need to be collected by way of crowdfunding or subscriptions, and as a result journalists are rarely able to perform extensive research for their articles. Those who work as journalists today need to slave for 16 hours a day to make sure that their newspapers survive and that they can, too.

H7 – You never really know who your work for, the ownership is opaque, there is always something fishy going on. You constantly work with this feeling that whatever it is that you're doing is being controlled from above. And that's immensely frustrating for a journalist.

One of the respondents referred to the challenges posed by the operations of global platforms.

H9 – There is an immense responsibility that is incumbent on the big tech players in the media industry as well as the politicians who are vested with the authority to regulate this market; they need to identify and tread the thin line between free expression on the one hand and security on the other – and in discussing this issue, media enterprises and journalists, too, need to go soberly into the negotiations. For one, a major challenge is to ensure that tech companies do not abuse the data they have about citizens, while at the same time we must also pre-empt the major threat of states exploiting this situation and abusing their authority – they should not try to expand and entrench their powers with reference to the issue of security.

4.b. What are the most important changes in your working conditions in the last five years?

Almost every respondent mentioned continuously deteriorating work conditions

H1 (over the past five years, our subject has had insight into the work conditions of four different newsrooms, including both pro-government newsrooms and newsrooms that operate independently of the government) – The work conditions are awful because Hungarian newsrooms tend to be poor. Their work accessories are in need of replacement, there are no staffers available to cover key areas, journalists are often forced to work as entrepreneurs and they labour for low pay, which results in financial insecurity and immense workloads.

H3 – The lack of money has resulted in a drastic decline in the volume of local reports; international reports have all but vanished.

H4 – Journalists have to cover too many thematic areas, and as a result they have less time and opportunity to explore issues that they are themselves interested in.

H6 – Since several of my former workplaces have been taken over by politics, some colleagues and I have founded our own online newspaper. While I was previously only responsible for articles I wrote myself, and sometimes I had as much as five days to write major pieces, I continue to produce these just as I did before, with the difference that nowadays I also spend the early morning hours on editing the writings of my colleagues. So there is a major change which results from the prevailing political situation. Ultimately, however, I don't mind that this is how things have shaped up.

At the same time, journalists noted as a positive development that the media has adapted to the new economic environment.

H8 – The widespread use of modern financing techniques, and more demand with an ability to pay.

A decidedly positive opinion was also voiced by a journalist (H9) who had previously worked for public media, as well as local, municipal media outlets and a national news site. Their experience reflects the experience of the staff of pro-government media in Hungary: I had it pretty well everywhere I worked; I was employed with an indefinite contract, the compensation scheme was not bad, I was professionally appreciated and allowed to work freely; I wasn't forced to unconscionably compromise my work.

A recurring element in the responses was the growing market concentration, the diminishing array of job options in the market and – in close connection with the aforementioned – growing political pressure. Several respondents noted that these factors have led to a decline in their motivation.

H1 – The most important change in the past five years was the creation of the portfolio of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (abbreviated as KESMA in Hungarian). As a result of the latter, we have seen an extraordinary decline in the news base while the work conditions of journalists have deteriorated significantly.

H3 – a newspaper can vanish suddenly

H10 – a journalist might be easily labelled a traitor merely for asking questions concerning certain issues involving public figures – questions that are definitely relevant for the public, for example inquiries into the sources of the wealth of the public figures in question. In many cases we can only obtain the relevant data by suing. And the most important consideration in understanding a given issue is how the respective political sides relate to it, who is for it and who is against it. That is not the way it ought to be; and this problem is not limited to the pro-government press.

H4 – what we are seeing in Hungary now is that people no longer demand change. After a while, this will render journalism obsolete, journalists will become cynical and they will be fed up with writing the umpteenth article describing how Lőrinc Mészáros, the billionaire pal of prime minister Viktor Orbán, has further boosted his wealth.

However, a journalist working for a commercial television channel (H8) sees a positive trend in the fact that “scoops are not without consequences”.

With regard to pressure, a journalist (H9) working for a pro-government media outlet noted that although they had run into pressure everywhere, that is part and parcel of what this profession is about: those who comment want to be featured in the media in a way they prefer. The question for the journalists is always whether they can say no. I've never been in any situation in which I thought I had to do something that was irreconcilable with my professional credo.

Some interview subjects also mentioned the changes in the legal environment among the circumstances that have deteriorated.

H1 – In November 2020, the government invoked the pandemic when adopting a decree which they extended the deadline for responding to freedom of information requests. Now, public institutions can take up to 90 days to respond to such inquiries. There have also been legal amendments concerning the privacy rights of public figures, and a constitutional amendment adopted in November 2020 has narrowed the definition of public funds.

H3 – those who comment are afraid that they will be subject to retaliation because of their comments.

5. How do you assess the current state of press freedom in your country?

An overwhelming majority of respondents has a crushingly low opinion of the state of press freedom. Even the respondent working for a pro-government newsroom said that “accessing information has become more difficult”, although on the whole they did not see any major changes as compared to the pre-2010 situation.

H9 – I don't think the state of press freedom has deteriorated significantly over the last decade or even when compared to 25 years ago. I saw instances of self-censorship and pressure already back then. At the same time, it is true that accessing information has become more difficult – but I think that owes to the fact that there is no pressure to form coalitions, there are no clashing interests within the government, there is no need to balance political interests.

The other respondents attributed the deterioration in the level of press freedom primarily to the pervasive politicisation of the media market.

H2 – The main limitations on press freedom do not stem from legislation but from the circumstances, the general framework wherein the press operate. This includes, for example, the high concentration of pro-government ownership in the media as well as the fact that the government allocates public advertising spending in a highly biased manner and uses such spending to fund pro-government media. A further limiting factor is that the work conditions of journalists are deteriorating substantially and it takes an enormous sense of professional commitment to continue under the prevailing circumstances; there is massive adverse selection going on in the market.

H3 – The room for operating a free press has narrowed because players with close ties to the governing party are either buying up independent publishers or are gaining influence over seemingly independent publishers. Certain publishers (for example Népszava, ATV, 168 óra) have entered into bargains of their own in return for state advertising. In the meanwhile, independent media outlets are being shut down one after the other.

H6 – Government-controlled media outlets whose work is coordinated from the centre are gaining ground: newsrooms that had previously operated as actual press products have been taken over en masse by political players. Today, these newsrooms are very much like giant billboards – they are instruments of direct political communication.

H7 – The end of Index as an independent newsroom marks the destruction of a major bastion. What's left is the rearguard – some 5-6% of the journalism left in Hungary is free. The few media that remain have a small audience. Index was the only media outlet through which large audiences could be reached. RTL does not function as a newspaper, it has no online presence and its principal objectives are different, its goal isn't the proper information of the public.

The respondents attribute the deterioration in the state of press freedom to the worsening work conditions of journalists, among other things.

H1 – Press freedom has not ceased in the sense that it's not impossible to publish media products or articles, but it is limited in the sense that the range of information that's available has narrowed substantially.

H8 – The attitudes/knowledge/deference of editors and opinion leaders were freer in the last decade of communism than what we see in the pro-government media outlets today. I thought we'd never again experience a situation like the one we are in now. There are newsrooms where orders are called in, articles are sent in, and they just copy-paste them. What makes this situation better than Putin's Russia is that those who want to write freely are not actually harmed in Hungary.

H5 – the situation of objective coverage has deteriorated

On the whole, there is a sense of menace the nature of which is difficult to pin down, but it nevertheless shapes the work of journalists.

H10 – There's no black car coming for us, but there are other ways of pressuring people. What they are playing at is a system in which you are free to write, there is just nowhere to publish it. They are trying to buy up the critical newspapers, to raze or realign them, and the same is true for TV channels, radio stations, everything that's media-related. I also see an unfounded sense of apprehension on the part of journalists. It's justified, of course, in the sense that they can be fired, but at the same time it's not like they will be imprisoned for writing something. The situation is not like in a hard-line dictatorship, although the same mechanisms are already present.

One of the respondents, however, saw the situation of independent media far more optimistically than the others. The reason is that since the pro-government media have to serve the interests of the government, there is less governmental pressure on the media that are not aligned with the government.

H4 – The newsrooms or publishers that manage to hold on to their independence in terms of financing can work relatively freely. In the pro-government media, the freedoms of expression and thought have narrowed to a stunning extent. Actually, it's not HVG – which is not aligned with the government – that is being censored but the pro-government Magyar Nemzet along with all the other pro-government media outlets.

6.a. In a dynamic perspective, how has changed the state of press freedom changed in the last five years? And which were the main changes of in the state of press freedom since you have been working as a journalist (if you've been working for longer than 5 years)?

With the exception of the respondent who works for a pro-government outlet, every other journalist has observed trends that are unequivocally negative. In addition to political pressure, this included changes in the technological and economic framework and the business instability of the digital media.

H1 - Press freedom has fallen to incredibly low levels in Hungary. This is most poignantly reflected in the fact that despite the work of the press, the representatives of the government and of the governing party can effectively do whatever they want without any repercussions.

H2 - The period of regime transition was a time of brief respite. But somewhere in the mid-90s the improvements in the level of press freedom stalled and we've been witnessing a hopeless trend of deterioration ever since. This trend did not change between 2002-2010 - the terms in government of the leftwing coalitions - either, and it continued after 2010, under the Fidesz governments. However, the decline was not as precipitous before 2010 as it has been since.

H7 - I began working as a journalist in Hungary in 2005, in a very diverse, high quality and exceedingly friendly/professional environment, which was methodically destroyed by those in power. Things began to get really rough starting in 2006, when Orbán no longer engaged in opposition politics but shifted to a politics of obstruction and Fidesz began building cadre media, which operated as attack-dog media (as well) rather than performing fact-based journalism. But the massive decline only began in 2010, since then they no longer tolerate anyone who's different. In the meanwhile, they support even media with an overt Nazi style (Vadhajtasok.hu).

H10 - Working for a county newspaper there are many topics that one cannot touch today, even though we had been allowed to cover these previously. Even before politicians had tried to have certain articles, issues or topics quashed, but such efforts were rarely successful. Today, it is perfectly normal for such effective suppression to occur, and sadly many readers also see this as a natural phenomenon. People increasingly think of the free press as an institution that spouts whatever it is that they want to hear about the world. This phenomenon is not limited to Fidesz supporters, we also see it among opposition voters in instances when a journalist is critical of their "side" - in the same way as they are with the government, actually. Opposition supporters can't abide that, either, even though that ought to be the normal, natural default setting for journalism.

H6 - When I started out in 2004 we still had a classical press market with print newspapers which funded themselves through a mix of advertising and subscriptions. By the end of the decade the rise of online newspapers which operate exclusively based on advertising had resulted in a decline of print newspapers. Then online news took a major hit as a result of the economic crisis and the surge of Google and Facebook, which collect a major portion of online advertising revenues. This was topped off by political pressure - it was easy to take over or shut down a press that was already massively weakened.

The respondents saw positive changes in the ability to adjust to the current situation and the launching of new media

H4 - There is the seed of the possibility of a new free press emerging in these new newsrooms, in the media that are independent of the government. The way the pro-government media operate, however, marks the comeback of an earlier, myopic political understanding of the press and its operations.

H6 - These days, one can only operate if one has readers who are willing to pay. To our surprise, such readers exist, however.

H8 - Journalists, too, have adapted to the struggle, they have acquired a wide variety of skills: digging up facts, suing for data, refusing to be intimidated, and managing their depression, the lack of consequences, etc.

7. What are the top 3-4 components of press freedom for you?

Among the factors that determine the level of press freedom, actual market competition and operating free from political intervention are key.

H3 - Journalists should not be subject to either political or business pressure and politics should not influence where commercial advertisers decide to advertise; journalists should have real access to information.

H4 - Free market competition is at least important as the freedom of information.

H6 - The financial independence of the majority of newsrooms depends either on the state or on businesses that are in a monopolistic position or are dominant market players. (Paradoxically, in our case this has now been perfectly realised, whereas previously it had not been the case. As a result, the level of press freedom that's available to the independent press is now higher than ever before).

H10 - There are no taboo issues that we may not touch, they do not make it impossible for us to pursue investigative reports or to scrutinise the activities of decision-makers; what gets published in the media or how it is covered is actually determined based on professional considerations and it is not up to advertisers or politicians to decide this; there are no efforts to silence media that are critical of the government, to pressure them, to "make them see reason".

A vital component of the free operation of the press is the clarity and stability of the legal background framing the work of journalists, the availability of legal safeguards which guarantee access to information and prevent arbitrary actions against journalists.

H8 - A democratic environment and a proper legal framework.

H6 - Independent courts, clear and transparent laws and regulations that apply equally to all journalists

H7 - Protection: if I write something that is based on facts, then the state should protect me through the laws because writing something that is based on facts is my job. Access, the freedom to operate (I can access a variety of places and view important events)

H9 - Access to information with public relevance

In addition to the external factors, several respondents also mentioned compliance with ethical standards - a stable moral and professional basis on which journalists rely on in their work - as a factor that shapes press freedom.

H4 - Compliance with professional and ethical standards.

H7 - There is some fundamental moral and social commitment (standing up for the weak and downtrodden)

H8 - Journalistic ethos.

H8 - The presence of conscious news consumers who support the work of journalists by following it, by being outraged and thinking critically, and in some cases with money.

H9 - The publication of a diversity of opinions. It's no problem if we disagree, but I think it's vital for all types of opinion to be featured.

8. Did you personally experience political and/or economic pressure in your work during the last two years? What does “pressure” mean for you? Describe 1-2 such examples from your own experience!

Pressure through advertisers

H2 – I haven’t experienced direct business pressure in my work in the past years. Indirect pressure, however, was heavily present. Our news site features no ads whatsoever because if a business dares advertising on our site, it will be stigmatised and audited by the authorities. During the time when I worked as the editor of a county newspaper, the pressure was incredibly intense. Advertisers emphasised their political and business interests and made clear that if the newspaper were to feature contents that did not align with these interests, they would pull their ads.

H3 – It’s a significant source of business pressure if your newspaper does not receive any state advertising from the government even as commercial advertisers don’t dare to buy any ads, either.

Work conditions

H1 – The economic pressure that my colleagues are subject to is manifest in the fact that they have to work without fixed work contracts, they often have no choice but to work for their newsrooms as single-person corporations.

H7 – My media outlet pays a very low salary, thereby keeping its workers in a dependent position. This is fed by a general trend, as journalists at other media outlets are in a similarly vulnerable position, and so are the media enterprises themselves. And there are some really mundane issues that nevertheless feel humiliating. Thus, for example, I pay the phone bill myself, and when we invite a guest to come on our show we can’t pay their taxi fare. The honorariums – too low to begin with – have not been raised in a long time. So what’s left is to struggle.

H7 – A typical dilemma for journalists these days is that they have to choose between working without censorship for very little pay or to take some job that is directly or indirectly dependent on taxpayer funding, even though they’re fully aware of how unethical this work would be. So this has emerged as a very real career-defining dilemma: to either do something unconscionable for lots of money or to become a destitute and frustrated scribe. Or – and this option is gaining ground – you leave the profession altogether.

Harassment, character assassination, direct pressure, social utility

H2 – Fidesz and its affiliated institutions do all in their power to interfere with our work. They set trolls loose on journalists. When they are trying to pressure a journalist on a given issue that the journalist is working on, they have people they know call the journalist in question. A new trend is that some opposition parties have begun using similar methods, too, as they try to gain influence over the media.

H3 – One example of political pressure are the efforts of pro-government private media and public media to discredit media that are not aligned with the government.

H8 – I’ve yet to meet a journalist who hasn’t experienced political/business pressure. And when I speak of pressure that doesn’t primarily mean that some brawny henchmen show up at our doorstep; a source of pressure can also a subtle hint by the politician which highlights that he is in a position of power. And they do communicate their objectives, sometimes subtly and vaguely, sometimes openly, saying “publish this and that about me” or something else about their opponent.

H9 – I’ve also ran into situations when someone failed to make headway by pressuring me directly so they turned to my boss. The idea is obviously that it’s more difficult to say no to one’s boss.

H10 – They’ve never tried to convince me to write propagandistic articles that were controlled from above, they’ve their own people for that. Instead, in the year after the newspaper was taken over by Mediaworks, we predominantly experienced situation in which we were jerked around and bullied. The editor-in-chief who was in charge that year was highly fanatical in their ideological outlook. They bullied me for months because they simply couldn’t live with the fact that I’m a liberal and that I make no secret of this. They constantly accused me of undermining the interests of the newspaper or of Fidesz in some way. I wasn’t the only one they focused on, but I was definitely one of the “favourites”. For the most part, they don’t quibble with the topics I write about, but it’s nevertheless extremely irksome to know that there are many issues we simply can’t write about. Even though I’m not the one who has to write the embarrassing stuff, it is still depressing to know that a county newspaper which should serve the entire populace has aligned itself with a political party.

H7 – How do you find meaning in your work in an environment when half the country doesn’t believe that your motivations are pure, that you are really driven by professional motivations? Instead, at the very best, they think you’re an activist. There is the lacking access to information about the various goings-on involving those in power, which makes you feel really redundant – what we’re doing is meaningless.

Lawsuits

H3 – One method of pressuring newspapers is to initiate many lawsuits against them. There is clearly political pressure behind this effort, it seeks to wear us down. A clear example of this are the lawsuits filed by the prime minister’s son-in-law, István Tiborcz. A journalist was detained and interrogated by the police for an article which stated that there are military vehicles on a manor owned by the prime minister’s pal, the billionaire Lőrinc Mészáros.

9. Do you think that the economic situation of your media outlet (media company) depends on the political environment? How does the political environment influence the economic situation of your media company? In your assessment, how can politics and the political leaders influence the economic situation of media companies in your country?

H1 – The publishers – including the publisher that employs the interview subject – are most effectively influenced by the withdrawal of state advertising money. Another instrument of political pressure is when the owner of a publishing company is regularly attacked and discredited by the pro-government media.

H2 – To ensure its independence, the publisher strives to create a subscription-based model that will allow us to operate without being at the mercy of political or business players.

H3 – Our newspaper is not directly dependent on politics because it is funded by the readers. It is dependent, however, in the sense that it does not have the same level of access to either state or commercial advertising as one would expect based on its circulation. The most effective way for politics to influence the financial situation of media enterprises is to reroute state and commercial advertising. Advertising makes up less than 5% of our revenues even though in terms of the copies sold, ours is the second

most widely-read weekly. Another phenomenon that is attributable to the political environment is that the share of subscribers is extremely low because of the political apprehensions of our readers.

H4 – Politics can also dominate the printers and the agencies that distribute the newspapers. Another tool in the arsenal of politics is the media tax.

H6 – We deliberately plan assuming very little in terms of advertising revenue and we fund our newspaper based on the financial support of our readers. But it would only take the stroke of a pen to abolish the possibility of donating money to newspapers and then it's game over. Until that happens, however, our dependence is merely theoretical – in practice we've been completely free in our work over the past two years, we only had to make our readers happy, we could blissfully ignore political expectations.

H7 – When a media company is too critical towards the government it will find that it's very hard to find commercial advertisers, and they will obviously have no access whatsoever to state advertising. And all this in a market where the state itself is the biggest advertiser. The state can also influence our operations through its regulatory powers, for instance the radios through its power to award frequencies. My outlet has been operating based on the donations of listeners for seven years now, we're practically begging them.

H8 – The government is in a position where it can blackmail media. Just consider state advertising – that in itself is enough to determine whether a media corporation can operate profitably or not. But the authorities can also pressure media owners by leaning on their activities outside the media business, if that's the way they want to go.

H9 – In all my years in this profession, I've never worked for a media provider that was able to operate without receiving some type of political support on the side. The Hungarian market is so small that there is no publisher that can operate purely based on the market, based on commercial advertising revenues alone. They all need someone to support them, a sponsor, and often enough they need state advertising, which will determine whether the given media company is profitable or not. Or they depend on the goodwill of the regulator to be exempt from certain tax rules or to make sure that those are not specifically targeted at them, to ensure that the legal environment does not change in a way that is detrimental for them specifically. There may always be some compromises in the background, some not readily apparent forms of support that help keep a media outlet afloat. This may be the result of deals that the journalist is at best vaguely aware of but has no real insight into.

10. In your assessment, is it possible to create and maintain a sustainable business model for pursuing journalism that covers current public affairs?

H1 – At least for a while it is possible to sustainably operate an apolitical publication with a small readership in the Hungarian market. Nevertheless, even such a media product will be subject to the risk that once it grows beyond a certain size, figures with ties to the governing party will make the owners an offer they can't refuse. If they nevertheless do refuse, then the publisher needs to brace itself for adverse consequences. It's impossible to sustainably operate a media product that covers public affairs against such a backdrop.

H2 – I'm hoping that the success we've had by asking our readers to sponsor us will serve as an example for other publishers to emulate. At the same time, it is also true that readers are often wary of supporting independent media because they're afraid of the

repercussions. That's why in some cases you'll find that the family's subscriptions are in grandma's name.

H3 – The survival of our newspaper is evidence that you can operate a newspaper with a sustainable business model. This model has proven its resilience even during the pandemic because we have managed to increase our sales during this time.

H4 – Looking at the machinery which is deployed to increase the governing party's influence over the media, it always turns out that they are operating methodically. Thus, the shutting down and occupation, respectively, of Népszabadság and Index, was a process that was planned years in advance and was implemented gradually over time. There is also a countervailing dynamic going on now, certain efforts drawing on the readers as investors, such as for example the recently launched telex.hu. That and similar efforts by other sites appear sustainable.

H8 – There are some heroic attempts that can stay afloat as long as the legal environment doesn't take another massive turn for the worse.

H9 – The sustainable way I see is one in which well-capitalised private persons or corporations come up with the business model.

11.a. In your opinion, does the legal framework of journalism play a decisive role in your work and in the functioning of your media company? Is it a rather positive or negative role? Have you ever decided not to publish something because of the unpredictable legal consequences?

H1 – Journalists have recently become a lot more cautious in touching certain issues because of the stricter regulations against scaremongering. Another legal change that inhibits our work is the constitutional amendment that has narrowed the concept of public funds, along with the government decree that has extended the authorities' deadline for responding to freedom of information requests.

H1 – Public figures and prominent business representatives are "smelling blood in the water", they are increasingly prone to attack publishers or the authors of given articles in court. This has emerged as a massive impediment in the way of the work done by journalists.

H2 – I've not been in a situation when I had to decide that in light of the unpredictable legal repercussions I will not to publish a given piece of information. What did happen, though, was that I couldn't finish my work on some issues even after months of research because I just couldn't get access to the necessary information.

H3 – The legal framework regulating our work is becoming increasingly restrictive, and this continuously impedes our efforts at gathering information. As of 1 January 2021, we are no longer allowed to use drones for recording, even though they were important tools for the media. The government decree extending the authorities' deadline for responding to freedom of information requests is another change that makes it harder for journalists to do their job. We've often had to decide to refrain from publishing certain pieces of information because of the unpredictable legal ramifications, since it often seems uncertain whether we would win a potential lawsuit filed in response to the article. We only publish information when our lawyers say that the odds of us losing in court are below 20%. The reason is that our publisher would not be able to fund a defeat in court. Furthermore, they want to avoid a situation in which the pro-government media can attack them and allege that we've been lying.

H7 – It's absolutely decisive, just look at the awarding of frequencies. A better media law could do wonders. The first thing that they rewrote using their two-thirds supermajority was the media law. The system in place is untouchable: the Media Council is entirely made up of Fidesz delegates and their terms extend beyond the terms of parliament.

H8 – We did make such a decision concerning a public issue because we were afraid of a lawsuit. It's very difficult to decide whether a given issue is a pure instance of whistleblowing where public interests are at stake or whether it is an instance of sensitive data being leaked.

H9 – It's interesting that since I started working as a journalist the legal framework regulating the profession has changed several times. Nevertheless, what I've done professionally has remained the same throughout, so in practice these legal changes do not impact in my work.

12.a. In the last two years, have you decided not to publish or to distort any information to avoid existential or economic consequences? Have you heard about such situations from your colleagues?

H1 – I used to work for a pro-government publisher. We regularly encountered situations in which the titles of articles were rewritten to exude a more positive message. Thus, for example, we were not allowed to write in the title that the forint had depreciated. They also made clear that tracking the official notices about public procurement decisions was not important. When we published articles which contained information that was available in the official company registry, a precondition for publishing was that the figure involved had to comment on the given piece of information. Figures with ties to the government never ended up responding to our inquiries, however, which meant that ultimately we couldn't write those articles. Although they never actually stopped any of my articles from being published, that was only possible because I grasped what I was permitted to write about and what I wasn't allowed to touch.

H2 – In some instances they didn't publish because there wasn't enough evidence or because the sources were afraid.

H3 – I've some colleagues who will not write certain things because they don't want to receive hundreds of threatening messages on their Facebook page yet again. Or they don't want the kids at their child's school to bully their child, saying that their dad is a "dirty liberal or Soros scum." There was also a situation when a journalist declined to write an investigative piece on Lőrinc Mészáros's wealth accumulation because they live near the billionaire and did not want bags of faeces chucked into their backyard.

H4 – The fear of losing one's job often looms over our head as we perform our work.

H7 – The Fidesz cronies like to sue a lot. They almost always end up losing, but part of the pressure you're subject to is that you have to keep defending and justifying yourself. You expend time, energy and money on this, and in the end it can wear you down massively.

H8 – I hear such stories from colleagues almost every day.



ROMANIA

RESPONDENTS' CHARACTERISTICS

- R1 Reporter for a *national newsroom*
- R2 *Journalist with more than 10 years' experience in coordinating a local newsroom*
- R3 *Journalist at a national radio station*
- R4 *Former manager of a national newsroom; former producer for another newsroom*
- R5 *Reporter in the local press*
- R6 *Chief editor for a national publication*
- R7 *Former investigative journalist within a traditional newsrooms, currently member of an independent media outlet*
- R8 *Journalist at one of the biggest online publications*
- R9 *Former journalists for several newsrooms, currently member of an independent journalists platform*
- R10 *Former chief editor for several publications*
- R11 *Chief editor of an online daily newspaper, independent, owned by an important West European media company*
- R12 *Journalist at the public radio, the national news department*
- R13 *Producer and host at the public television*
- R14 *Producer of minorities programs at a regional branch of the public television*
- R15 Chief editor of an *online publication* focused on the mass-media market

Note: The journalists accounts presented below are paraphrases, and quotes.

1.a. How do you assess the social role/ social roles of the journalists in (your country)?

The journalists involved in the study made a distinction between their role, as they see it, in the current social, political and economic context, and their role, as their public sees it.

The journalists mentioned the expectation of the general public that the media should solve problems in our society – from very concrete issues affecting their community and ending with direct involvement in the political conflicts, or in eradicating corruption.

The interviewed journalists believe that citizens of Romania suffer from an acute lack of trust in public authorities and, therefore, these journalists believe that their audience turns to them in order to solve problems that otherwise should be dealt with in courts or otherwise.

Furthermore, bearing in mind the recent past (starting with the massive street protests in 2017), there is an expectation from the general public that journalists should embark into the political fight. Activist journalism is expected to replace objective reporting. Some of the journalists mentioned that the contents of their social media accounts were criticised for what they consider to be honest reporting, and they were asked to give up on the values of objectivity so that they would not, for example, facilitate the success of a political party that is perceived in Romania as being “corrupt”.

Another factor mentioned as constantly reshaping the social roles of journalists is the thin line between being a journalist or an influencer. Social media gave a public arena to people who are not journalists, but commentators or analysts. Despite the importance of such roles in a democratic public forum, it has been mentioned by the respondent journalists that some of these commentators are neither experts, nor people with legitimacy to embark in this process, but they are nevertheless highly appreciated by the general public. This has impact on mass-media as it pushes for a journalistic approach focused more on opinion and less on facts. Some of the respondents mentioned that one of the causes for this phenomenon is the de-professionalization of journalism.

A final factor mentioned as relevant in shaping the journalists’ role in society was the so-called “mogul effect”. There is a general agreement that there are media outlets that are obviously taking one political side, but there is no open public admittance of such political partisanship. It has been mentioned, by the respondents, that this leads to confusion and makes it more difficult for the public to understand a media outlet’s agenda.

R7 - The social role of the media, in general, is to inform citizens. What has happened lately is that we are being bombarded by different citizens, including from rural areas, who have the impression that we are the rescue to all their problems. They have lost hope in the judiciary and are coming to us as if we were their last hope.

R9 - There should be a delimitation between journalism and activism, which is not happening now in Romania. What is happening in Romania is that journalists are making plans to „save the country”. [He was reproached that if he didn’t do a particular thing in his work, as a journalist, the Social Democratic Party would come and we would all be sorry]. There is a political context that pushes journalists towards political activism, which is unethical regarding readers. It seems that the press moguls have decided that their newsrooms should be politically involved, but without a public acknowledgment of this political bias. In newsrooms openly dedicated to being politically engaged, it is simpler for the reader to know how to decode the message. But from the press presumably non-involved in the political game, it is more complicated, because it claims to be independent.

R10 - The press positioned itself not only as an intermediary of information, but also as a moral court. So, it is natural that people expect the press to do what the authorities

do not do. But the press must not replace justice, it must be humble. It’s just that the press sometimes abuses this position. There is a tone of justice in the media that creates an expectation for the press to solve things. Which sometimes it does - see the example of nosocomial [infections in hospitals]. It should normally make life easier for the authorities by drawing attention to relevant aspects of society. The level of pressure that journalists put on the authorities is high, compared to what is happening around our country.

R12 - Accurate reflection of reality. Now, in Romania, there are almost no roles for the journalists. I am referring primarily to televised journalism. Tv stations are still the main source of information for Romanians, but televisions are partisan. Whether they belong to party leaders (...), or belong to people who have been in political entourage, they seem to be politically regimented. Here the important role should be played by the public television, but the national station has a politicized administrative board.

1.b. How do you assess the reputation of journalists in your country?

All the journalists interviewed stated that Romania is now in a time when the reputation of journalists is poor and that there is a general mistrust from the public towards this profession. This is rather contradictory to the social roles that the respondents attributed to journalists in the first section of the interview, when they mentioned the expectation of citizens, that journalists should solve problems in their communities.

Most of the people interviewed consider that this reluctance and mistrust of the general public is justified, bearing in mind the de-professionalization, as a consequence of superficiality in reporting by some of their colleagues, or the ambiguous mix between influencer and journalist. Another factor that affects the image of journalists is the general perception of the media outlets where journalists work. According to some of the answers, there is a tendency for the general public to associate all journalists from a newsroom with the “mogul” that owns it or with the leading political commentators of that newsroom. It has been mentioned that no matter how one journalist chooses to do her/his job, she/he would be associated with the general direction of the media outlet where she/he works.

Some of the respondents mentioned that it is hard to live up to the general public expectations because of the political passion of the public. Social media platforms have enhanced the interactivity between the public and journalists and this led to situations that increase the pressure on journalists to take a political side. Whenever this does not happen, there is an aggressive reaction of the public towards those journalists. Therefore, some of the journalists involved in the study mentioned that their reputation is sometimes altered by the political agenda of the media consumers.

The National Council of Audiovisual, the institution that should supervise the audiovisual in Romania, has failed, in the opinion of some respondents. Therefore, one of the solutions could be to have a form of self-regulation within the profession.

R1 - It is very difficult for a reporter or journalist to have a reputation/identity separate from that of the person who makes the largest audience for the news station at which he/she works for. And when there are controversial statements/ a bad reputation for it, the whole newsroom suffers, regardless of its size.

R4 - The journalists’ image is extremely affected - the media consumer can no longer discern between the journalist and the influencer. Social networks have led to role confusions - we no longer know who is the person who gives his opinion and who is the

journalist who documents and publishes facts. Sometimes information is strictly validated by virtue of the number of shares on social media.

R7 - Some have the feeling that the whole press is politically enrolled. People seem to need new politicians, new leaders, and they look at these new political figures as saviors. Or, if a journalist comes and criticizes this new political movement, he/she is accused of being a politically engaged journalist. Every time they write against the PNL and USR [the National Liberal Party and the Save Romania Party], people come to tell them that they are paid by PSD [the Social Democratic Party], and vice versa.

R15 - In Romania, journalists are no longer seen as a respected guild. The general perception is that they have abandoned their mission to serve their audience and that they serve anyone other than the public: they serve their employers, they serve the economic interests, the secret services or politicians.

R13 - There has been so much talk about a code of ethics for the profession, for a strong union - as a doctor/lawyer responds in front of the guild when it harms the profession; just as architects respond to a code of ethics - so should journalists. There are journalists who have put themselves in the service of the untruth, they bring a disservice to the guild. The biggest danger is that the profession itself is irrelevant - neither principles nor experience matter, the profession is abolished, anyone can do it.

2. Which are the top three positive and the top three negative characteristics of journalism in your country?

The respondents could not agree on a common set of positive characteristics of journalists, but rather they have identified some exceptions to the negative ones.

Almost each of the respondents mentioned that most of the journalists lack the strictness in the process of documenting their articles. This leads to situations in which journalists are a source of fake news. Also, the journalists involved in the study mentioned that the internal editorial pressures (economic and political) end up with journalists mainly implementing the agenda of the press moguls they are working for, while paying little attention to the public interest.

Another major problem identified by several persons involved in the study is the lack of solidarity among journalists and little to no availability for collaboration across newsrooms.

Several respondents have mentioned that they have come across journalists that do not mention the source of the primary news. Besides that, because of insufficient funds allocated to field work, they have noticed that there is a common practice of resuming one's job to picking information online, with little reporting alongside the "Facebook status" news.

A frequently mentioned problem (although not as an answer to this question) is the fluid roles of some in the profession. The ambiguity of roles for some journalists (political adviser, member of a party, PR specialist) and the economic and political agenda they embody are factors that severely affect the journalistic activity.

Most of the problems mentioned seem to be generated by the low pay and de-professionalization.

The positive characteristics were presented in most of the cases as exceptions. Among the qualities mentioned are the perseverance of some of the journalists to perform their duty despite pressures in the newsroom they work in. One of the respondents mentioned that the work that some journalists did during the pandemic was of extreme importance for Romania, bearing in mind their stubbornness and their thorough investigative methods, during a period in which most of the respondents mentioned that public interest information was highly inaccessible.

R8 - The superficiality in verifying the information, sometimes the information being taken over without a minimum of verification. Lack of objectivity. It can get here if the journalist creates too many friendships in the field he writes about. Ideally, the journalist should maintain as much professional relations as possible with the people in the field.

R15 - Curious and full of imagination. We overflow with imagination. And critical thinking. I am not saying that it is not sometimes exercised in self-interest, but it is a rather obvious phenomenon. Negative: recklessness and irresponsibility. Many are unaware of the effects of the terrible things they wrap as journalism. Others, who are aware of the effects, are irresponsible. Then there is cynicism/amorality and docility - the ease with which it molds its spine to what is required.

R4 - Fear of collaboration in the guild. Stupid pride, especially in the independent press area - extremely rarely, press articles are republished in order to increase the impact of those subjects. There is no reflex to quote information. There are very few models and very little training. A very big problem is that, in fact, there is no longer a good school of journalism, post-university studies - there is no room for apprenticeships.

R6 - There is no solidarity among the journalists - if there is an important person (minister, president, etc.) in a room, who will offend a journalist, you will not be able to unite ten people to refuse to ask questions [to that minister, president, etc.] after such an episode. Such solidarity at the level of the whole guild is out of discussion.

R7 - Although most journalists are very poorly paid, there are some who do their work with dedication; there are some who document their materials very, very well, and there are journalists who still ask uncomfortable questions. Negatives: there are some who have chosen to serve certain political interests; there are some who do not document the materials as they should. They prefer to forward fake news, including fake news from politicians' statements. There are situations where certain journalists choose to document the topics in front of computers, without testing the reality in the field (there are many journalists who do not even call the person being written about).

R11 - Positive: combativeness, the resilience of the local press, a press that I thought was dead, but during the pandemic it proved that it has viable and valuable information from the community. An extremely competitive market materialized through the number of publications, TV stations and websites - this means a great variety of opinion.

Negative: the irrationality of combativeness. The clickbait has become almost an acceptable norm in ¾ of our newsrooms. It is considered normal. The lies in the titles out of the desire to capture an audience has become a norm. The unprecedented dependence of almost all newsrooms on public money that is distributed both partisan and without any rationale.

3. Do you consider that journalists in your country are facing challenges that are impeding their work? What are the biggest obstacles that journalists face in their profession?

All the respondents mentioned as an obstacle the access to public interest information. The legal provisions, despite being perfectible, should be enough to ensure access to information, but in fact the respondent journalists feel they are used by public authorities mainly to obstruct access to information. FOIA Act (Law no. 544/2001) and GDPR (data protection) provisions are mainly used to impede journalistic work. The alternative solution is the appeal to justice, but it is a rather long and costly process. Not all journalists have the resources to do it. Furthermore, bearing in mind the lengthy time before in court decision is made, the relevance of the subject is often overdue.

A challenge mentioned by the vast majority of journalists included in the study are the pressures that lead to censorship and self-censorship. Political pressures were referred to in the context of media moguls still controlling some of the newsrooms in Romania. Several respondents mentioned that there are taboo subjects for some of the media outlets. Among the most frequently mentioned pressures are the economic ones. The media in Romania is still (heavily) financed by public institutions. Taking different forms (promoting the activity of local institutions in the form of commercial ads, direct public funding from the Government during the pandemic, contracts between local authorities and local press etc.), the money coming from public authorities are considered by the respondents to seriously affect the independence of the newsrooms. Highly criticised was the decision of the Romanian Government to directly finance a national campaign aiming at informing citizens during the first year of the pandemic. Most of the respondents involved in the study mentioned this measure as a direct intervention in the editorial agenda of most of the media outlets, as they have noticed that journalists working in these newsrooms softened their criticism towards the Government after receiving the funds.

Economic pressures also come in the form of low pay and job insecurity. Most of the respondents mentioned that there still exists the practice to avoid hiring journalists with permanent labour contracts (mainly by using instead copyright contracts), which leaves the journalists at the whims of the employer. Furthermore, because of the very low pay, there are journalists who are forced to write a certain number of articles/day, which prevents them from working on in-depth stories.

A third type of pressure was identified as coming via the public. There were respondents who mentioned that the pressures coming from the audience that journalists have on their own social media accounts, could affect their work, as they might be tempted to self-censorship in order to not lose their public. Furthermore, social media has also contributed to the phenomenon of fake news, as journalists are being pressured to publish their materials fast and have little time for checking the accuracy of newsworthy information.

A distinctive set of problems mentioned was in regard to the local press. According to some of the journalists, there is an acute lack of funds allocated for the minimal logistics needed in a newsroom.

R4 - Many public authorities do not respond to requests on the basis of Law no. 544/2001 [on access to public interest information] (...) The GDPR law [data protection] - is invoked very often in order not to respond to journalists' requests.

R6 - There is an extreme barrier to public information in Romania. Everything starts from public institutions. And this problem has worsened in recent years. Example: during the pandemic, when transparency was needed, we did not have complete data). Journalists ended up going to court for receiving information such as how public money is spent. And these kinds of lawsuits take up to two years.

R4 - The pressure coming from social media - they no longer have the time to check the information because there is a competition between newsrooms and people on social media to publish first the information. There no longer exist the funds necessary for investigative tv formats/investigative content. It is very expensive to have a team for an investigative production and only very few media companies can afford such content.

R1 - Pressures from the editorial management. There is a path of enhancing these pressures - politicians, television channels owners, editorial directors. There are often requests to quit a specific topic. Moreover, beyond political interests, there are also economic interests - editors who do not take into account the quality of materials, but are focused on their quantity. There is also pressure from audiences, because newsrooms are dependent on advertising contracts (there are no direct subscriptions paid by mainstream media consumers). This rush of not missing out on what is considered a hot subject led to making derisory the idea of checking information from three sources. Therefore, it is really easy to publish fake news.

R2 - In what concerns local press: there is a lack of technological means (up to date) to collect information - no software is paid, there is not even a minimum of voice recorders, there is no online team available to the journalists, and sometimes there are not even cars available for field work (the journalist needs to use his own resources). There is a lot of economic insecurity and there are many situations where, on journalists' labour contracts, the tax fees that ensure that they get health insurance are not paid. There are a lot of political pressures on the local press. There are situations in which newspapers were left without access to distribution kiosks, or companies that used to pay for advertising in certain newspapers withdraw their contracts because of fear of the politicians about whom we write in the newspapers.

R4 - The volatility of the media market is huge because there is no security in the labour market in this area. I worked in a media company for eight years and I didn't have a work contract. At my next work place, in the next newsroom, there were several consecutive short-term employment contracts. It's a way to put pressure on journalists, a kind of blackmail. Because, at a certain moment, they could not conclude these contracts in the case of some journalists (they can do it for a maximum of three years), they hire them in other companies [belonging to the same media owners]. People need this job (monthly expenses, loans, children, etc.), so they will not say anything and will accept this form of employment.

4.a. The working conditions for journalists from Western Europe compared to the working conditions in Romania are better or worse?

All journalists included in the study stated that there are consistent differences between Western countries and Romania regarding the working conditions. Among the most important differences, they mentioned the legal framework, which, in Western Europe countries, grants better protection for journalists. Another frequently mentioned difference is the public perception regarding journalistic outcomes. There is no reflex from the general public in Romania to pay for content, therefore almost all media rely on traditional forms of budgeting (exception – independent media outlets that have a recurrent donation system that works). Also, the investment in technology infrastructure and training is considered better for Western newsrooms.

Another important difference is in the funds available for the investigation teams within newsrooms. Respondents mentioned that in Romania there are very few traditional media outlets willing to invest resources in investigative journalism. Furthermore, the very low pay forces journalists to produce content focusing more on volume and not on con-

tent. Another effect of the poor budgeting of newsrooms is the insufficient resources for field work, which severely affects the reporting process.

The general attitude of public institutions towards journalists was another difference mentioned, as it is perceived that Western authorities show more respect to journalism and, therefore, allow more access of the press to public information.

The small number of journalists within a newsroom and the lack of specialization for journalists are other important differences that affect the work of journalists in Romania. The respondents mentioned that this is also a consequence of poor budgeting of media institutions that ends up in a lower quality of press outcomes.

A considerable number of journalists mentioned as an important difference the lack of protection for journalists. One of the journalists talked about receiving death threats, made by influential politicians, while she worked at a local newspaper. The weak legislative context and the lack of NGOs or structures to defend them expose journalists to threats that, in their opinion, are no longer existent in Western Europe.

R1 - There are two essential differences: readers' respect for the work done by journalists and the authorities' respect for public information. The practice of paying subscriptions for various contents is quite common in Western Europe, and people are aware that in this way they finance the quality of journalists' work, versus Romania where readers complain that they have to watch commercials before reaching the content. The public authorities in Western Europe respect the journalistic act and respond promptly to press requests.

R6 - Some of the challenges related to pressures in the newsrooms may be similar across Europe. I think there is, however, a tradition of the democratic press in the West that has a huge lead over ours. We cannot recover this difference in 30 years. And the social status associated with being a journalist is much stronger in Europe than in Romania - security, laws that prevent abuse, institutions that prevent abuse. But there are also incidents with journalists that were shot, that we don't have here.

R8 - A problem in Romania is the insufficient funding in this field. From this point of view, western journalists are much more advantaged, have better working conditions, more advanced technical equipment and, of course, are more financially motivated.

R15 - From a technical point of view, we are coming close, but we do not come equal. Romania is deficient in terms of databases - computerized systems lack in public institutions. For the technical part of the job: journalists are well equipped, they have cameras, etc. But this is hardly enough to produce good materials. We suffer in terms of human resources: we have no newsroom to compete with newsrooms in Western countries. You have newsrooms of up to 80 people in Romania - therefore we cannot compete with big newsrooms in Western Europe. As for the legislation and salaries - and when I say the salary area I do not mean the size of the salary, but the way it is ensured: types of contracts, contract security and your protection as an employee.

R10 - A serious problem is that journalists can no longer travel. I'm not even talking about the local press. If we have an event like the one in Piatra Neamț [fire at a COVID hospital], the editorial office will discuss how there are no accommodation and transport funds, etc. If a man from the editorial office decides that it is a subject worth travelling for, the financial department will block this editorial initiative.

R12 - In the west there is a better legal basis for the protection of journalists. They have a better material base and they have sort of a comfort there. Our press is going through a crisis, people are afraid of losing their salary, which affects their freedom.

4.b. What are the most important changes in your working conditions in the last five years?

The most recurrent observation is that in the last years Romania has experienced a significant growth in the number of independent newsrooms. This has echoed in the traditional newsrooms, as some of the respondents mentioned that a significant number of journalists migrated towards the independent press. On the other hand, journalists sometimes migrate to political parties or PR jobs.

The development of online media in recent years is also seen as significantly affecting journalism. On one hand, there is a stronger pressure to swiftly publish news, which affects accuracy. On the other hand, advertising budgets were diverted from news outlets to social platforms. The pandemic brought more financial strain on the newsrooms.

Another significant change, in the opinion of the journalists involved in the study, is the deterioration of the access of journalists to public information. They mentioned that the way public authorities interpret to comply with the FOIA requests has been deteriorating in the last years.

A particular case is that of public radio and television, where some of the respondents note the recent change in funding (from licence fee taxes paid by citizens to direct state budget allocation) as putting more pressure on editorial freedoms, even if its forms are subtle.

Some of the respondents referred to the pandemic context and considered that part of the practices imposed during this time (remote work) could be useful for their work.

R1 - The economic crisis has made many good journalists, from traditional newsrooms, move to independent journalism, so that many of the existing newsrooms at the time of 2009 have emptied over the years. The pandemic has profoundly affected the way journalism is done - entire newsrooms have moved most of their work home.

R7 - In the last five years, more and more independent media organizations have started, which is visible in the media landscape. Therefore, the space for journalists has increased.

R2 - Reducing the number of journalists in the local press - they either migrated to political parties or got a job with a better salary.

R2 - A lot of money has been lost from advertising in recent years because the private sector has migrated with advertising on social platforms and advertising contracts have increasingly weakened financially even more the newsrooms [advertising on social networks can be much cheaper and more targeted].

R14 - Conditions have worsened severely. The budgets have been drastically reduced. There is no money for travel, limited budgets in general.

R13 - Public radio and TV are no longer public but state owned, bearing in mind the subordination of these institutions in 2017 [financing directly from the state budget]. This situation is well illustrated by Doinea Gradea [head of the public television]: „I have to beg for your salaries from the government and you criticize the government”.

R12 - There has always been an appearance of radio independence [on the public radio], because we measure in minutes the presence of parties in broadcasts and try to keep a balance. But it is one thing for a politician to appear during the day, and quite another to be broadcast in the middle of the night. One is to make 5 news out of a single statement of a political actor, and that of the opponent to appear buried somewhere towards the end of the radio news bulletin.

R3 - During the pandemic, there have been radio newsrooms who managed to make radio from home, which can be a very important discovery for the radio of the future.

5. How do you assess the current state of press freedom in your country?

All the respondents agreed that, officially and according to the legal framework, in Romania the right to freedom of the press is granted. But the way journalists can make use of it is rather restrictive, therefore there is, in fact, a rather small space for exercising this freedom. Again, the poor funding of the media was invoked as a reason for restricting media freedom – journalists depend on budgets in order to report on a subject they consider important. More importantly, some of the journalists mentioned that the economic and political interests of media outlets affect the editorial agenda. There still exists in newsrooms the practice of censoring some subjects and, even more, there is a spread phenomenon of self-censorship among the journalists working in these newsrooms, as they are afraid of losing their jobs.

The poor access to public information was mentioned as an important factor that affects freedom of the press. A final factor limiting media freedom is popularity and the need for an audience: some of the journalists mentioned that the clickbait practice, the economic interests of media outlets and the need for reinforcing the political beliefs of the public sometimes have an important impact on the agenda of a media outlet.

R1 - The freedom of the press ends where the interests of the press owners begin. Whoever says something else, lies. There still are newsrooms where team coordinators prevent certain topics from airing. The only places where this does not happen is in the independent press.

R3 - There is an intense phenomenon of political partisanship in the media and a poor knowledge/compliance with the deontological norms in the guild. These things affect the freedom of the press.

R4 - Overall, there seems to be freedom of the press. We are doing relatively well, people can talk. However, in newsrooms there exists the practice that certain topics are stopped from broadcasting. There are many impediments in documenting some topics. In the traditional newsrooms there is also the phenomenon of self-censorship - a self-preservation instinct is activated that makes you stop pushing topics that you know are not working. (...) You don't leave that newsroom, because you're financially dependent (...)

R11 - We are an EU country, censorship in our country does not apply in Russian or Chinese terms, rights are guaranteed, there are no systemic pressures and aggressions. There are cases, but it is not typical. Censorship in our country is rather in lack of resources, and in the self-censorship of the newsroom or in partisanship.

6.a. In a dynamic perspective, how has the state of press freedom changed in the last five years?

All the journalists who were interviewed considered that media freedom has worsened in the last years, mainly because of the economic pressures. Bearing in mind the decline of the advertising market, the respondents mentioned the practice of public money being diverted to media outlets as a serious threat to freedom of the press.

The respondents gave examples that, in their view, are relevant for the tendency of a shrinking space for media freedom. One such episode dates back in 2017, when a newsroom was pressured by authorities to indicate the name of the sources of an investigative news article on the president of the ruling party back then. Another serious episode took place in 2019, when a journalist received death threats from a policeman. A worrying trend is public institutions suing journalists in court for libel.

Most of the journalists mentioned the pandemic year as being one of the worst periods in recent years. Measures such as the extension of the deadline for answering to access to information requests, the committee which, unilaterally and with no legal review, could ban websites on the ground of fake news dissemination, or the attempts to modify the Law on access to public interest information, with no prior public consultation, were mentioned as episodes that would indicate towards a negative tendency of freedom of the press.

To add to all these, some of the journalists involved in the study mentioned online communication, as a worsening factor for how media freedom parameters have changed in the past five years. It was mentioned that there are politicians and people in office that use their social media pages to put pressure on journalists. Another effect of social media is one often repeated by the respondents: the public pressure and the critiques that are expressed online, which push journalists to self-censorship.

R1 - Because the money from advertising is less, the freedom of the press also suffered. The financial pressure is much higher and at such times it is much easier for editorial pressures.

R15 - When the advertising market stagnates, and when the authorities - ministries, town halls - become an important advertising client, the press becomes vulnerable. You are a watchdog! How can you watch them when they provide you large sums of money. Likewise, when politicians choose their journalists, or when the president of Romania only allows journalists to ask one question at a time, after which his answer is irrelevant because he knows that the journalist cannot ask a second question; when there are hundreds of sites for which there is only the clickbait; when you have public media institutions who have nothing to do with their public role, they only hold the name of public radio and tv.

R7 - Regulations during the state of emergency - the possibility for an institution [a governmental committee] to label fake news and the possibility of closing the sites publishing fake news. Public institutions tend to bully journalists by going to court - there are many cases of journalistic coverage that ends up being in court after a lawsuit is filed by representatives of public institutions.

6.b. And which were the main changes of the state of press freedom since you started working as a journalist (if working for longer than 5 years)?

Journalists with more than 20 years' experience mentioned that now the coordinates of press freedom are far better than it was when they began their career in the press. They have mentioned that they have witnessed censorship practices far worse than today (referring mostly to years 2000).

R3 - The most important change is related to the phenomenon of fake news. And the development of social networks and the power they have in manipulating citizens has effects on freedom of expression. Journalists are often under pressure from these phenomena.

R13 - The 90s were the romantic years - it seemed to us that journalism has a higher stake; the 2000s - were the years of the resettlement of the press, the resettlement of properties, the employers - the waters were cleared. The last decade - less vibrant - those who leave [the journalism] schools want more to be seen on TV, are more pragmatic, ask what is the salary - pragmatism replaces the romance.

R12 - Immediately after 1990 it was a golden period, many independent publications appeared; radios appeared very quickly, then, more slowly, TV - television held power. You look for the degree of freedom of the press in the independent press. And there we have to make a difference. Then, the independent press was monopolized by the press moguls, who had, for the most part, criminal problems. Now it is a struggle for survival. But social media helps a lot because they complete the press a bit. Now it is not important to be the first to publish the information, because that it appears everywhere, but to contextualize it.

R11 - We are less free; I'm in the press from the '90s. It seems to me that we lost on two components. We now fear the public and its reaction on social media. This leads to self-censorship and ideological partisanship. Both produce a press illiberalism.

7. What are the top 3-4 components of press freedom for you?

Most of the respondents mentioned as crucial components of media freedom the right to have access to public interest information and the transparency in the activity of public institutions (including here public institutions availability to answer to FOIA requests in good faith and according to deadlines imposed by Law). Another frequently mentioned element was the financial stability of media outlets and the need for political and economic independence.

Transparency of media ownership and sources of funding, and integrity of journalists are also considered as indicators of press freedom. Self-regulation of the journalists and the industry are needed. An apolitical National Audiovisual Council as well as public media institutions truly serving the public interest, are seen as missing components for true media freedom in Romania.

R15: Media transparency in all areas: shareholders, sources of money for media companies. Transparency of journalists: conflicts of interest. Strong industry actors should organize themselves as a forum for self-regulation/a Code to refer to. An apolitical CNA that would really ensure the smooth running of the game on TV. Public media institutions to work for the public interest. Legislation to ensure that journalists have unrestricted access to public information and the unrestricted pursuit of their profession.

8. Have you, personally, experienced political and / or economic pressure in the work you do in the last two years? What does "pressure" mean for you? Describe here 1-2 such examples [of political or economic pressures] from your experiences.

Pressure was mentioned in the form of threats (starting with lawsuits and ending with physical threats), economic constraints (being forced to protect the interests of private companies) and political partisanship and taboos.

R1 - There were situations in which the editors did not allow for a topic to be documented, because it involved a certain politician.

R6 - I felt, but rather indirect, not directly on me. I heard voices in the newsroom, during the live broadcasting: „don't criticize person X" or „don't give news about the diaspora vote" or „politician x is not our friend".

R5 - There is a lot of pressure at the local level. Physical threats, threats with lawsuits.

R7 - Pressure from public institutions threatening with huge fines in order to obtain the disclosure of the sources. There is also public pressure from politicians who insinuate that newsrooms are paid [financed by entities with political interests].

R15 - Politically no, but economically yes. We also write about advertising clients - if the ads are correct, if they comply with the law, etc. There was no direct pressure, but I can't deny that if I write something about a client, I don't keep in mind that the client may not leave our company (almost 100% dependent on advertising). I wrote about a disguised campaign that two clinics were doing and I assumed that they might not want to be our customers anymore. Then, there is an example of a big private broadcaster: we criticized them when they used the channel to put pressure on a telecom company - I wrote about it, after which the broadcaster cut off all communications with us - no press release, nothing; it's a form of pressure.

The lack of protection offered by a long-term labour contract is considered by most of the respondent journalists as a tool of editorial pressure and control of media managers over their employees. Not having a long-term contract makes journalists vulnerable and, therefore, can lead to self-censorship.

An important form of pressure was mentioned for the local press – companies withdrawing their advertising contracts as a consequence of politicians calling these companies to complain about being criticized by these media outlets.

R1 - All newsrooms in Romania feel the management's pressure in media institutions. All journalists were forced, at some point, to give up a subject due to pressure from superiors (yes, some did not give up, but had to leave the respective newsrooms). [The respondent repeatedly insinuated that he/she also feels editorial pressure in the current newsroom, but avoided giving a concrete example (he/she gave the interview while being at work)].

R2 - There were economic and political pressures: the withdrawal of some companies that bought advertising space (following some phone calls given by the politicians about whom the publication wrote), exclusion from the kiosks where the newspapers were sold, an online bullying campaign (based on untruths), direct death threats addressed to the respondent. In one case, the respondent was promised that if she withdraws a complaint for these threats, she will receive exclusive topics from the police.

R4 - There were often moments when he was told in the newsroom: „the article will not be published". No one explains why a certain article is not published. (...) There is content [about companies] provided by media owners: "We pay salaries from their money. We will publish their content".

R4 - There is a huge political pressure in the local press. Sometimes she was personally threatened, other times there were even attempts of physical assault. When complaining to the police, they advised to wear a defence spray (without providing other support). There was sometimes the fear of getting physically hurt.

R14 - Fixed-term contracts with journalists are a very effective tool of economic pressure. A colleague lost his contract with the TV station after proposing a series-pamphlet about the prime minister.

9.a. Do you think that the economic situation of the media institution where you work is dependent on the political environment?

Some of the respondents consider that political parties influence the economic situation of the media. It is especially obvious in the case of the public radio and television, where the licence fee (the tax paid by citizens) was removed, and replaced with direct state funding.

R7 - No, but it is a constant concern for independent publications because they have to fundraise, which is expensive for an editorial office.

R13 - 100% yes.

R12 - 100% no, especially since the licence fee for the public radio was removed; being paid from the budget, dependence on the government is obvious. Any budget rectification is a threat.

9.b. How does the political environment influence the economic situation of your media company? In your assessment, how can politics and the political leaders influence the economic situation of media companies in your country?

Across all interviews, the journalists mentioned that the economic situation of media outlets, as it looks now in Romania, is a big problem for the press.

The respondents mentioned again the pressures made by politicians on local advertisers to withdraw advertising from the publications that criticize them.

Important tools for political parties' influence over the economic situation of newsrooms are local authorities. The respondent journalists mentioned that the local press is strongly financed through advertising contracts with local authorities and institutions. They mentioned that this type of financial dependency strongly affects the independence of a newsroom. Furthermore, the central (national) media also has advertising contracts with local authorities. All these contracts have the potential, in the respondents' view, of affecting the objectivity of a newsroom towards the public authority.

Most of the journalists interviewed reminded once again that the funds allocated by the government during the pandemic, with the official justification that the media outlets need financial support, was a severe interference in the freedom of the press. They considered that this measure strongly affected the media willingness to criticize the government's approach to pandemic.

R2 - Decisive. Politicians have persuaded companies to withdraw advertising from publications critical of them (by threatening to control their companies: „Do you have money to pay for enemy newspapers?“).

R5 - If a media outlet is a party's propagandist, you can deal with money in the newsroom much easier. There is the practice of having contracts with the County Councils for the provision of services. Contracts have higher values [than market values]; payments are made on time. The money that the Government decided to give during the pandemic [for an information campaign] had no other purpose than to lure journalists (...). Journalists had to inform the citizens anyway, what's the point of this money?

R10 - There are very few newsrooms that live strictly with funds from the market. One form of political support for media institutions is debt relief. Money from the state can be stolen directly from the state (media institutions belonging to politicians with proven problems in the justice system), institutions that take money from the mayors, whose political agenda they support. And that's because there aren't many newsrooms that can support themselves independently. These funding schemes have been encouraged even by the [current] Government, under the pretext of the pandemic - millions of euros in the press are poison. From the monitoring I went through, it paid off. If the Social Democratic Party [the former ruling party] were in power now, after Piatra Neamț [a fire at a COVID hospital, which resulted in deaths], now it would be war. Money was put in the press for this type of reaction.

A possible alternative could be the public media institutions - but national television stations are struggling to stay under the radar. It is the only television in the world that strives to remain unseen.

10. In your assessment, is it possible to create and maintain a sustainable business model for journalism in the current context?

A possible financial solution that would help fund a healthy journalistic product was identified in the recurrent donations from the press consumers. But most of the respondents mentioned that this would be possible only for small newsrooms. It is a model used by the independent press in Romania, but, as a journalist from one of these independent media institutions mentioned, it is an expensive and time-consuming practice, falling on the shoulders of journalists themselves.

Another possible way would be direct subscriptions for the content. But respondents mentioned that in Romania there is no reflex to pay for journalistic content and, therefore, it would be rather impossible to finance an entire newsroom as such.

Almost all journalists included in the study mentioned that the first thing to be done in order to develop a healthy and sustainable financial mechanism for a media institution would be a complete cut from the public funds.

R2 - Direct subscription of readers. Theoretically, 2000 people, for a small subscription, should be enough to maintain a decent newsroom. But in Romania there is no reflex to pay for content. Creating community-relevant events as a pretext for fundraising for the publication.

R1 - Journalists are seen as a socio-professional category that works for free. There are expectations of documenting, of journalistic investigations, but people are no longer willing to pay for this content, so they are perceived as volunteers of the society.

R4 - People have completely forgotten that they used to buy the newspaper. Now no one is willing to pay for editorial content. There is currently no sustainable funding model in Romania. And because there is no such reflex of the reader to pay for the content, there is always the risk that a good publication will be taken over by an owner who will destroy it. The ideal mix is selling and advertising. You can't live exclusively from readers either. Until the economic crisis, there were very high salaries in the press. After the crisis, we again reached a bad financing area. This may be a sign that all wages before the crisis were money dubiously obtained by media owners. Because salaries are very low and working conditions are so bad, some journalists choose to go to public institutions or communication/PR. That is one of the reasons why the press has become unprofessional.

R5 - For local publications this possible model is very complicated. There is no local economy, there is a lot of poverty and, therefore, there is no possibility of advertising contracts to support a local publication. Ideally, there should have been grants for the local press to support the newsrooms, but these are fantasies.

R10 - There should be a register of funding from public institutions or politicians - you may find that we actually have over half of publicly funded media outlets. And yes, there is a form of subtle pressure - the moment you stop the money to the media institution, they start criticizing that public institution. (...) The money that goes to different media institutions via town halls and county councils - distorts the media market. Public money is used to influence the media market.

11a. In your opinion, does the media legal framework play a determining role in your work, and in the function of your media company? Is it a rather positive or negative role?

The general understanding concerning the legal framework is that the legal provisions are not extremely bad, but the way public authorities interpret to enforce them is in disregard to the public interest. A special focus of the respondents was again on the access to public interest information legislation (Law no. 544/2001) and the GDPR provisions that are often used against journalists and as a shield to maintain opacity. There is the option of going to court, but it takes money and time, and few journalists can afford this.

The enforcement of the audiovisual law by the National Audiovisual Council was mentioned by some of the respondents as being ineffective.

Also, some of the respondents mentioned that the law of public radio and television broadcasters should be reformed.

It was reminded that the whistleblower law should be enforced.

On its turn, the media should also be made more transparent, by law, according to some respondents. This includes transparency of media ownership and sources of funding.

Strategic litigation and self-regulation could be instrumental in improving the legal framework in which media currently operates in the opinion of some of the respondents.

R2: Law no. 544 [on access to public interest information] and Law no. 52 [public transparency] are used to harass journalists rather than to support them in their journalistic documentation [there have been situations in which responses to requests for information have reached the competing press]. The law providing for the protection of personal data is another legislative instrument used to circumvent the provision of information of public interest. The whistleblower law would also help, but this is also frequently violated.

R5: [instead of waiting for official responses to public interest information requests] I work with sources much faster (they take pictures of documents and send them to me).

R7: If you want to go to trial because they didn't answer your request for public information, the process is so long that you may not find the data useful.

R5: The GDPR law has not yet been well clarified internationally either. Unfortunately, in our country it was abused and affected journalists' work. The GDPR is invoked to hide information of public interest. The legislation is favourable, in general, enforcement is problematic.

R10: NCA [National Council for AudioVisual] is not functional.

R13: The law of public radio and television broadcasters - was surprisingly modern for the 90's. Now there are a few points that need to be changed: the separation of the President position from the General Manager position, a public contest in order to occupy these positions, return to the system of taxation for the public [the licence fee tax paid by citizens, for the public tv and radio].

R12: We don't have a press' law, I think it would be needed. Lack of transparency - we do not have the transparency of funds spent on public media. Also, the transparency of the owners would increase the public's trust.

R10: If I gave money for something, I would give for strategic litigation.

R13: The best regulation is the de-regulation of the journalistic profession. Any regulation produced by an almost illiterate political environment can do us much harm. Self-regulation would be the best solution.

11.b. Have you ever decided not to publish something because of the unpredictable legal consequences?

Civil lawsuits are used as a deterrent against journalists, as the respondents have explained. Sometimes journalists have to face such lawsuits on their own, with no support from their employer. There are legal costs and also time investment is needed. But many of the respondents said that the prospect of a potential lawsuit did not stop them from publishing.

R6: No. In Romania, there is often the threat of going to court, but it rarely happens and much less often for the journalist to lose. This threat with a process has intensified in recent years, especially because of the GDPR - notifications are being sent to publications threatening that they were not allowed to write about person X. It happens quite often in the tabloid press.

R12: Not. I preferred to do my job at the risk of being censored, which is what happened.

R11: I know that journalists are censored, they are afraid of lawsuits, they are not assisted by their newsrooms - it's about money, lost time - a lot of it. Investigative journalists are the most exposed - we have lawsuits three times a month. Journalists must physically go to court, the journalist knows the case best.

12.a. In the last two years, have you decided not to publish information to avoid economic consequences?

Most of the journalists mentioned that there is the practice of refusal of censoring topics from publication, by the editorial management. Some of the journalists who were interviewed said that they decided to give the subject of their journalistic research to colleagues in other newsrooms, so that it had the chance to reach the public. Others just gave up on subjects.

Another conduct, leading to self-censorship, is what some of the respondents called to be *taboo subjects*. Despite not being explicitly told not to deal with a certain subject, politician, political party, or company, there is, in some newsrooms, the common knowledge that a certain topic cannot be touched upon by journalists.

R1: Yes, it still happens that politicians call the newsrooms/editors/owners to withdraw content that was published. One of the major problems is that the Romanian press owner is not interested in the public interest, but his agenda is a political or economic one.

R4: The respondent was often told in newsrooms that he could not publish a material, but without explanations. There are certain taboo subjects in some newsrooms, which journalists know cannot be touched.

12.b. Have you heard about such situations from your colleagues?

Approximately half of the respondents mentioned that they know about colleagues that were asked to give up on their articles. They did not give a precise example, but they mentioned that they know the practice persists in some of the newsrooms.

R6: I think that the newsrooms in Romania were full of topics unpublished for years. I think that now in Romania it is harder to keep a subject pending for publishing than it was 10-15 years ago, because now you have many places where you can give the subject. The biggest pressure is in the management/editorial area, the reporter doesn't even get to attack a subject that the management doesn't want to touch.



SLOVAKIA

RESPONDENTS' CHARACTERISTICS

Tomáš Bella, *Denník N* daily, Chief of online section

Pavol Bielik, TA3, Anchor of daily public affairs programme *Téma dňa* (*Topic of the day*)

Lukáš Diko, *Investigative Center of Ján Kuciak*, Chairperson

Filip Domovec, *Plus jeden deň* daily, Journalist

Katarína Gécziiová, *Korzar* biggest regional daily, Deputy Editor-in-Chief

Miroslava Kernová, *omediach.sk* media portal, Owner

Eugen Korda, *.týždeň* weekly, Journalist

Zuzana Kovačič Hanzelová, *SME* daily online (sme.sk),
Anchor of socio-political discussions *Rozhovory ZKH* (*ZKH Talks*)

Jana Krescanko Dibáková, *TV Joj*, News reporter,
Anchor of political debate *Na hrane* (*At the edge*)

Pavol Majchrák, [Postoj.sk](https://postoj.sk), Deputy Editor-in-Chief

Andrej Matišák, *Pravda* daily, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Foreign-affairs desk

Dušan Mikušovič, *Denník N* daily, Journalist

Ján Modrovský, *Slovak Syndicate of Journalists*, Chairperson

Alena Pániková, Self-regulatory *Press-Digital Council*, Chairperson

Zoltán Rácz, *Trend* economy-weekly, Journalist

Peter Tkačenko, *SME* daily, Columnist

Martina Toroková, *TV Markíza*, News reporter

Pavel Urban, *SITA* news agency, part-time journalist (former Deputy Editor-in-Chief)

Marek Vagovič, [Aktuality.sk](https://www.aktuality.sk), Deputy Editor-in-Chief

Lucia Vírostková, Public *RTVS*, Journalist

Braňo Závodský, *Rádio Expres*, Anchor of political discussion
Braňo Závodský naživo (Braňo Závodský Live)

Undisclosed, Public *RTVS*, Journalist

Avoided (three different representatives contacted, no appointment scheduled):
TASR, public news agency

1.a.) How do you assess the social role/ social roles of the journalists in (your country)?

Overall, a social position (role) of the journalist reflects a general development of Slovak society. Wide variety of opinions concerning this question were noted, some pointing out towards increased perception of the profession, leading to uplifting of its social status. Solidarity, togetherness among the journalists was visibly strengthened in the aftermath of the Ján Kuciak's murder (February 2018). A common view that economic conditions of journalists could have been much better was also widespread. Various respondents brought up a problem of verification of journalists – that certain license (accreditation) would be needed as its non-existence makes it complicated for ordinary citizens to orientate between real professionals and social media 'sources'.

"There is no special privileged status, journalists, similarly as all other people, have to work." [Braňo Závodský, *Rádio Expres*]

"I don't see my role as a mission, I'm not a known person, I do want to communicate through the work, not by attracting the fan-base through the social networks." [Dušan Mikušovič, *Denník N* daily]

"Journalist is privileged to explain to other the idea that is unknown to him." [Filip Domovec, *Plus 1 Deň* daily]

"There is no need to legalize it, but let's unify the criteria for recognition of journalists – education or some sort of media activity as well own publication record, excluding engaging in hoaxes. There should be a social consensus on this." [Pavol Modrovský, Slovak Syndicate of Journalists]

Some respondents drew attention to the fact there is no legal definition of the 'journalist' in the Slovak legislation and such a limbo leads often to uncertainty in their working status and conditions. Most of the journalist are contracted as self-employed rather than as employees (some 75 per cent, according to estimate from the Slovak Syndicate of Journalists' Chair), with media houses being apparent beneficiaries of this *modus operandi* - all social and health insurance payments are paid by journalists (ad1); the journalists have to suffice with minimal working protection as terminating of their services (that is based invoice-based) can happen any moment (ad2).

"We need to ask what it means 'a journalist' in Slovak reality, there is no such definition in our legislation." [Peter Bielik, *TA3* news channel]

1.b.) How do you assess the reputation of journalists in your country?

Many journalists assessed their reputation as satisfactory. At the same time they acknowledged that it should be better and higher. Overall, being influential, having a say to public affairs, to shape public discourse through its own work, those were remarks shared by many journalists.

As a consequence of hyenous murder of Ján Kuciak, young investigative journalist from [aktuality.sk](https://www.aktuality.sk) (alongside with his fiancée) in February 2018, the reputation of the profession has overall increased. One would assume that a significant portion of society has understood the importance of journalism and dangers that journalists potentially face. However, most of the interviewed did not dare to quantify whether this social awakening could really be applied to the majority of population or only to its critical masse (in the latter, however, the understanding appears to be very visible). Also, it was noted that a courage to focus on more controversial or sensitive topics has increased, an investigative element in some media has been taken more seriously.

"After the murder people really realised how important, and dangerous is work of a journalist. In this sense the reputation has increased." [Marek Vagovič, [Aktuality.sk](https://www.aktuality.sk) news portal]

Overall, it was agreed that for some 1-2 years (2018-2019) the negative labeling of journalists decreased (and expressions like 'good-for-nothing, useless mouths [darmožráči], dirty Slovak prostitutes, pressstitutes' have been diminished), as well as negative targetting on social media. However, with the suicide of the imprisoned former Police Chief Milan Lučanský (December 2020) – that has been twisted in various conspiratory stories - led to a new wave of negativity towards mainstream media. While a number of core journalists' supporters is stronger and probably wider than before the murder, overall, there is a clear polarisation within the society and scissors' gap is further widening.

Most of the answers reflected this increasing polarization, including concerning the profession's perception. Rise of disinformation sources (or so-called 'alternative' sources) also brought a topic of journalism into the negative spotlight - they target the system, the mainstream, including the mainstream journalists, and its active, often one-sided and manipulative social media content often inflamed vitriolic reactions towards journalists.

"A vocal group of social media haters has appeared, in addition, disinformation on-line sources are more regularly focusing on journalists." [Zuzana Kovačič Hanzelová, [SME.sk](https://www.sme.sk) news portal]

"Journalists are the losing side of this hybrid wars." [Peter Tkačenko, *SME* daily]

"On a daily basis, there are hatred expressions and reactions on social media from people with lower media literacy, including older generations who recently discovered new online opportunities." [Martina Toroková, *TV Markíza*]

Important feature that should not be forgotten is the ever-lasting influence of the politicians which is still rather negative. However, almost *en bloc*, a friendlier and more respectful attitude of current political establishment (ruling coalition after 2020 parliamentary elections) in comparison with the past, was noted. Former prime minister Robert Fico (from SMER-SD [Direction-Social Democracy]), in particular, attacked journalists on a regular and systematic basis trying to discredit and damage their reputation on purpose.

In addition, it is crucial to mention the phenomena of several politicians that operate on the verge of disinformation scene (not admittedly, but if reflecting the content and used vocabulary, very vividly) – from nationalist, pro-fascist parties that are supported by echo-chamber of several online sources to one of the most popular politicians on Facebook (most popular social media channel concerning politics in Slovakia) – Ľuboš

Blaha. One of top politicians of then-ruling SMER-SD (now opposition parliamentary party) is widely known for his toxic derogatory (and propagandistically pro-Russian) views. He uses distortion and manipulative selection of facts as a working method to attack all sorts of oponents, a style presented by himself as a sophisticated way of criticism.

"Politicians, in particular those that are afraid, further widened negative perception. Fico contributed to degradation with his discrediting labeling, such as slimy snake or toilet spider, against real serious journalists". [Miroslava Kernová, omediach.sk, media portal]

Some also noted that journalists to some degree contributed to this environment – which can be attributed to non-existing (or loosely respecting) self-regulatory mechanisms, as well as too active presence of journalists on social networks, often crossing a thin line of ethical standards.

"Partly it is caused by communication of journalists on social networks, while media outlets too, do not exercise their opportunities to minimize confrontation by drawing significant attention to the Code of Ethics principles. Vocal group of social media haters has appeared. In addition, disinformation online sources are more regularly focusing on journalists." [Lukáš Diko, Investigative Center of Ján Kuciak]

"The perception of a journalist has moved from someone unknown who's role is to seek the truth towards more personality-oriented, it is more personal, image-based." [Lucia Vírostková, public RTVS]

2.) Which are the top three positive and the top three negative characteristics of journalism in your country?

Most of the journalists started to answer with negative features, somewhat indicative on its own. On the other hand, it is important that journalists do realize their public authority and influence over public affairs, very visible manifested during massive Slovak protests in spring 2019 (*For decent Slovakia [Za slušné Slovensko]*) – they lasted for several months as civic protests against the abuse of power, nevertheless, the initial impulse was motivated by the murder's public outburst.

Several aspects were mentioned as positive and negative aspects, most prominently the following features

Positive characteristics

- A general feeling that journalist can contribute to an overall good, to improving things, life in the country. Most of the journalists stay on a side of truth, honesty and rule of law and have ability to fulfil a fundamental media role – to inform citizens and to defend their interests by controlling the power;
- Freedom to do what is important/newsworthy, not what somebody wishes me to do;
- Overall, there are free media outlets existing in Slovakia, even if in defunct democracy. In comparison with neighboring countries, there is a wider range of media with pro-liberal-democracy and common-sense values – certainly in comparison with Hungary or Poland, but also when looking into Czech scene, so-called 'crazy views' are much more limited in Slovakia;
- There is a sense that journalist have their important say on a public discourse, that they can shape the agenda with their stories. This feeling seems to be even more

- important given the sense of despair not so long time ago when despite various serious revelations there was no public reaction or a visible resonance;
- Critical, courageous journalism is present and after the murder this feature is visible even more;
- A chance to reflect variety of areas (politics, culture, media) as well as of topics, not only of a political nature (social issues, single mothers, etc);
- While underfinanced, still very important investigative element in many outlets;
- Several strong and independent media despite the fact that significant part of media arena is controlled by oligarchs;
- Strong media outlets that generated several respected journalistic personalities;
- Relatively easy to reach out to politicians;
- It is one of the most interesting things to do;

Negative characteristics

- Financial situation of media, often understaffed newsrooms, requires overload of journalists – that is further stressed by a newsroom multi-genre tasks (text, video, podcast). At the same time, their financial conditions are not reflecting this growing demands;
- Content-oriented, too fast and stressed era – with an aspiration to be ever quicker, the quality is often compromised, producing a rather unfinished, superficial outcome. Social media boom also contributed to generally lower quality reporting as media newsroom try to catch up with a popularity of quick and short social media posts. As a result (in combination with a lack of big media houses that would create conditions for more analytical journalism), there is a decline in long-reads journalistic forms;
- Leaning towards tabloidization, superficiality, often even disinformation or false reporting. Also leaning towards commentary-type of journalism rather than reporting as a possible effect of social media threads;
- Political activism of some journalists, the media outlets are less and less seen as a platform of different views (as was previously at expense of pursuing own political views);
- The very fact that the murder of journalist actually could happen;
- Misperception of a concept of journalist, with proliferation of social media accounts and self-declared 'outlets', people are misused, which goes hand in hand with lack of digital media literacy;
- Social pressure (victimization, targeting on social media) often combined with political pressure;
- A limited number of really exceptional journalists, including low-level personal qualities of existing journalists, such as provincialism, manners, arrogance, status-based drive;
- The poor state of public media is influencing the media environment on its whole, as the new generation has no desire to work for them. Overall, it is manifested in various aspects – political influence (selection of topics, guests in political discussions), over-reaching effort of balance, at expense of more courageous, issues-driven reporting;

"If speaking about the quality of public discourse, it is getting sharper, more clan-based society, with waves of hate are much stronger than it used to be in the past."
[Jozef Majchrák, [Postoj.sk](https://postoj.sk)]

3.a.) Do you consider that journalists in your country are facing challenges that are impeding their work?

Yes, various challenges have been mentioned, most in the connection with the usual daily routine, such as rather heavy workload and unsatisfactory financial conditions.

3.b.) What are the most serious work challenges that journalists are facing in your country?

There are various moments that journalists are facing, some perceived as normal conditions that belong to their work (sometimes difficult and rocky relationship with politicians or officials), some are seen as more serious or troublesome.

Among this could be counted hostility from some business circles that eventually led to murder of Ján Kuciak in February 2018. While the perpetrators of the murder are known, the investigation who ordered it is still ongoing. Nevertheless, one of the most controversial businessman in Slovakia that is accused of masterminding it (Marián Kočner), created a scheme aimed to spy on most critical journalists (such as Monika Tódová from *Denník N*, Adam Valček from *SME*, Ján Kuciak from aktuality.sk), paparazi, threaten and discredit them through publication of tapped communication or compromising materials.¹

Within the scheme, a list of 29 journalists (as well as their 140 relatives) from mainstream media was created, subsequently lustrated in cooperation with contacts from within the police, and spied on during 2017.

"You have to have a strong motivation to stay in this system, to face threats, following, disinformation trolling, black PR or even institutionalized reputation damage. While there is no direct evidence of political order, it was happening to those journalists critical to SMER." [Jana Krescanková-Dibáková, TV JOJ]

Other aspects mentioned was a habit of Slovak society to receive information for free. Perhaps, there is a growing part of population that understands the needs and price of quality journalism, however, it is estimated at some 20 per cent. The current financial model is not healthy, given that huge share of advertising money is taken by big tech firms, such as Google.

"Media are forced to focus on activities that are profitable, to hire young, less costly journalists, while many senior ones left the profession for a better paid PR. As a result, the quality of media outcome is decreasing." [Miroslava Kernová, omediach.sk]

¹ Marián Kočner in these activities closely cooperated with Peter Tóth, who was a former chief of Slovak counterintelligence (within SIS - Slovak Information Service [*Slovenská informačná služba*], working for 5 years in daily *SME* as a double agent. Website napranieri.sk created by the former to publish such materials operated for several months in 2018, while the latter moderated special web portal with similar policy (datel.sk).

4.a.) Do you think that the daily working conditions of the journalists in Western countries, comparing to the ones in your country, are

Mostly it was difficult to compare given relatively low level of exchange with foreign newsrooms or lack of personal foreign experience. Nevertheless, when comparing with neighboring Czech media outlets, very many journalists admitted bigger support teams – where in Slovak media 1-2 people are designed for a team, the same type of reporting is supported by 5-6 people in Czech media.

There is an assumption of better financial conditions of western journalists, however, if taken by average salary of the country, it's relatively comparable. Presumably, technical side of media operation is advanced in a similar fashion. Bigger media houses, operating in the West are presumably more suited for more in-depth journalism, with a more generous timeline provided to cover some serious issues.

4.b.) What are the most important changes in your working conditions in the last five years?

Home office, in particular in connection with COVID-19 pandemics, but numerous journalists mentioned this factor as a change regardless of it, starting already time ago.

Also, numerous journalists (in particular from print and online sources) pointed out at management demands towards their newsrooms - to become multimedia journalist as given. One reasoning of this demand is to increase professional level of the output, the other are motivated by fast production available on social media, and by a chance to financially rationalize their operation.

"It is great to have broader skills, however, it is probably not right to expect that a writing journalist is automatically equipped to prepare a video story or to produce a podcast." [Andrej Matišák, *Pravda* daily]

One specific case was represented by media web portal omediach.sk (About media) which was launched by a single journalist previously working for daily *SME*. The beginning was difficult and unexpected by its protective and unfair manners - the advertising companies working for big media houses tried to limit any chance of the new media outlet to secure any contract on the market. The owner managed to find the clients through a quality and systemic reporting, and decided to cut advertising intermediaries entirely, not to skew her business.

5.) How do you assess the current state of press freedom in your country?

Quite good, adequate. Given the situation in some post-Soviet countries or even in our neighbors such as Hungary and Poland, there is not much to really complain about in Slovakia – if speaking about fundamentals of the profession.

6.a.) In a dynamic perspective, how has changed the state of press freedom in the last five years?

That is rather difficult to summarise as there were multiple answers. Most of the journalists noted some kind of positive progressive change over last years, others noted that it is linked to election cycle, thus depending on the results, which means that the freedoms are respected fully or elsewhere in a declaratory manner - as it was the case of Fico's later governments where prime minister himself on a regular basis either attacked several critical media or did not answer their questions.

Such behaviour inherently produced effect of self-censorship in some journalists' minds. This was also a card that is believed Marián Kočner, a businessman accused of masterminding murder of Ján Kuciak, was playing with – that the threatening will eventually pay off and journalists will stop digging into his problematic deals and that nobody would care about their problems.

As a positive paradox, outcome of 2018 milestone murder, is much stronger sense of what freedom of media actually means, there is change in a climate, for both society that ventured to massive public protests and certainly for journalists and media that seem to emboldened in their quest for truth.

Some noted that the press freedom has extensified – while media, and broadcast media in first place, are bound by strict legal regulations, there are no limits for misuse of freedom elsewhere, in particular in online sphere.

The case of public broadcaster RTVS (combining together TV and radio) has been mentioned several times throughout the various segments, mostly in a negative context. Yet another example was brought up in this question. Since the state of the public media impacts the whole media environment and is sort of manifestation of press freedom in the country, its dire current state was lamented.

"Public TV is not as good as it should be, the perceived influence of a politically appointed director is being felt. There is a self-censorship, there is no drive for controversial topics, because those who opened them in the past, were fired. Everyone who dared to say something, eventually left or was left. Directors, including those of TASR [public agency] and RTVS Council should be less political, otherwise it is openly visible."
[Miroslava Kernová, omediach.sk]

At the same time, media concentration has been mentioned, with big financial groups diversifying their portfolio with media business. While in some cases the results are yet to be seen (Czech PPF Group of recently deceased Petr Kellner purchased in late 2019 most popular TV *Markíza*), in other cases is the effect on the content obvious (Slovak financial group Penta through its News and Media Holding since 2015 owns tabloid dailies and weeklies *Plus 1 Deň/Plus 7 Dní* or economic weekly *Trend*).

6.b.) And which were the main changes of the state of press freedom since you have been working as a journalist (if working for longer than 5 years)?

"It was a period in which the modus operandi between journalists and politicians was further calibrating, including through the European Court for Human Rights. Still, the attitude of state towards media is different than 25 years ago – Fico did not dare to go that far as Mečiar, to eliminate individual critical media outlet. In Slovakia it is about the owner, and we are living in a relatively happy period that most of the owners do not interfere." [Tomáš Bella, Denník N online]

Very important aspect and significant change in work of many journalists, as it was widely acknowledged, is access to information that was rapidly improved over last decades (through the Law No. 211/2000 On Free Access to Information). As of 2011 another supplementary law entered into force which made obligatory access to all state contracts, a huge addition towards a more transparent governance.

Social media power in all aspects is what resonated amongst the journalists too. A previous tendency (some decade ago) to claim big financial compensations from the media, has declined significantly. On the other hand, there is a finding that the organized crime be very brutal.

7.) What are the top 3-4 components of press freedom for you?

This was a question with that enabled journalists to really think more broadly of what their profession really means to them – some admitting that they have never faced such angle. Noteworthy, mostly basic journalistic standards, both professionally and ethically have been mentioned, such as

- To have a freedom and independence to inform, to seek for a truth – if some newsworthy topic is discovered, it is up to journalist to decide how to cover it;
- To be a watch-dog of the power;
- To realize accountability at the same time;
- To defend public interest, to help free democratic society to flourish, while protecting the most vulnerable;
- To have a platform where the opinions are presented – and that the owners will not interfere against them or that the opinions are not punished by the power;
- To be financially viable/independent, to have a clear division between management and content, as well as to be free from political pressure;
- To have a strong management that stands by a journalist, including its legal services;
- To have a free newsroom exchange that pushes for higher quality reporting;
- To avoid close relationship with politicians to preserve own independence;
- To have a free market, not obscured by some shady deals;
- To have a strong professional organization that unites and protects journalists in problematic cases and times;

8.a.) Did you personally experience political and/or economic pressure on your work in the last two years?

Most of the journalists did not. The public media person that did not want to be disclosed for a fear of retribution shared an opposite view – that on various occasions the political considerations (influence) were presented and halted or prompted some topics or selection of respondents.

However, there are several other prominent journalists that left (editor-in-chief of newsroom Lukáš Diko, chief of investigative programme Eugen Korda, journalist Zuzana Kovačič Hanzelová) that shared similar experience which overall results in a rather damaged reputation of the public broadcaster, certainly within the media professionals.²

While journalists from *Trend* and *Plus 1 Deň*, print media outlets from the News & Media Holding (that belongs to Penta Investments, a controversial financial group) admitted that certain economical topics are seen as taboo (core business of the owner and related political aspects) and that self-censorship is the ultimate result, they did not want to provide more details.

8.b.) What does “pressure” mean for you?

Mostly it is viewed as direct order or censorship from the media management {senior editor} even though more subtle forms (hints, comments, recommendations what to/not to cover) are seen as leading in that direction. At the same time, it is important that factor of politicians is probably decreasing in the context of ‘pressure’. Noteworthy, the social media and very vitriolic commentaries are seen as a dangerous tool in pressuring journalists – either by implanting seeds of fear of negative reactions or by introducing self-censorship tendencies.

8.c.) Describe here 1-2 such examples from your experiences!

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9.a.) Do you think that the economic situation of your media outlet (media company) depends on the political environment? Yes/ No (If No, jump to q. 10)

Almost unisono, no – if assuming that an existing concept of liberal democracy will continue. Naturally, if more authoritarian parties (ĽSNS, Republika) would gain power, the existing situation could be endangered.

9. How does the political environment influence the economic situation of your media company? In your assessment, how can politics and the political leaders influence the economic situation of media companies in your country?

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² During 2018-2020 more than 30 respected journalists left public broadcaster (mostly from its TV arm) in protest to various forms of management interference or pro-government reporting.

³ In 2014, the Penta Investments, Slovak financial group with a problematic reputation announced the purchase of Petit Press, the publisher of the newspaper SME. In reaction, a major part of the editorial board, including the editor-in-chief, announced their resignation. As stated by Matúš Kostolný, the departing editor-in-chief, reported by aktualne.cz, “We are leaving SME and we will try to create a new medium that no one will suspect that it serves someone other than the readers”. The outlet, starting under label *Projekt N*, was launched with a significant initial investment by known Slovak software-company Eset.

10.) In your assessment, is it possible to create and maintain a sustainable business model for pursuing journalism in current public issues?

Yes, it is possible. Most of the answers pointed out in direction of *Denník N* daily project that was launched at the beginning of 2015.³ Despite rather pessimistic expectations it quickly became one of the most respected example of quality journalism, running daily paper issue as well as very influential online version.

“Yes, we are such medium. Our subscription model we projected a correlation between what our readers wish for with what our journalists want to write about. And it has worked very successfully, we are not dependent on any advertising, only on subscription.” [Tomáš Bella, *Denník N* online]

*“It is a difficult task, quality reporting always pulls for a shorter end. There is a need for such journalism, however, is there a demand? *Denník N* is one of a kind (as well as *Deník N* in Czech Republic⁴). They were lucky to find a very solid investor, at the same time there is a real room for own journalistic work.”* [Alena Pániková, Press Digital Council]

11.a.) In your opinion, does the legal framework of journalism play a determining role in your work, and in the function of your media company?

Respondents did not consider themselves legal experts, thus commented on the question in a rather subtle manner. Most of the journalists nodded that the media legal framework is essentially fine and in line with basic democratic values. Despite the threat posed by the 2008 Press Law initial wording (concerning right for response and right for correction and requirements of publishers in this respect), media houses fortunately have not encountered serious or damaging consequences. Partly also due to the fact of their unified position and resistance.

11.b.) Is it a rather positive or negative role?

The responses varied between positive and somewhat neutral. Legal framework is in place, and despite some problematic aspects that are still present (defamation is still a criminal offence in Slovakia) it is not causing any real harm, quite opposite.

11.c.) Have you ever decided not to publish something because of the unpredictable legal consequences?

Yes, there were several cases presented, however nothing of a major nature. While some cases were noted, the final decision not to publish some material was reasoned by lack of factual evidence, a real journalistic issue.

12.a.) In the last two years, have you decided not to publish or distort any information to avoid existential or economic consequences?

None of the journalists faced directly such existential moment.

⁴ It was launched in 2018, with the help of N Press, publisher of Slovak *Denník N*, that provided its know-how and currently controls 33 per cent of N Media, publisher of Czech outlet.

12.b.) Have you heard about such situations from your colleagues?

Some of them mentioned such situations, but did not venture to specify details. An overwhelming majority of cases referred to journalists from other outlets, not from their own media. The murder of Ján Kuciak was brought into spotlight, as he was threatened, too. While it has sounded as a message to be scared - delivered from businessman Kočner (currently under accusation of masterminding journalist's murder), it was subsequently not picked up by the police and eventually led to a hyenous murder.



