



Building

Trust in

Journalism

- Slovakia

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Building Trust in Journalism – Slovakia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy report provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities that the media are facing in Slovakia. Based on a number of interviews that took place with key Slovak media stakeholders, it finds that the Slovak media landscape is currently the freest of the Visegrad countries, despite an increase in both government and oligarch control of media. These findings are in line with its [RSF Press Freedom Ranking](#) of 33rd place in 2020, up two places on the previous year.¹ The murder of investigative reporter, Ján Kuciak, in 2018 was a turning point which established sense of solidarity amongst the media profession which is coupled with an apparent desire amongst some of the public to investigative journalism, demonstrated through their financial support of a number of influential independent media titles. There are some concerns in relation to mainstream media ownership which appears to remain firmly in the grip of a select number of financial groups and oligarchs with strong business and economic interests although a recent sale of shares in leading publication the *Denník SME* to the Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF), a non-for-profit investment fund for independent media raises some hope. The government also continues to control the public media through politicised appointment processes and public advertising spend. The popularity of websites, which are typified by health disinformation and anti-European Union narratives, is a further cause for concern as similar narratives are now being disseminated by some of the online media. The tradition for investigative journalism is strong in Slovakia, however, and it is having some impact on policy and tackling corruption.

This report draws the following conclusions:

The murder of investigative reporter, Ján Kuciak, in 2018 was seen as a wakeup call to the media and has spurred both public and political calls to support freedom of expression and the protection of journalists in Slovakia.

Oligarch control of the media is a trend although, while political interests are present and visible particularly prior to elections, their main interests seem to rest in the financial and economic opportunities that the media can afford to them. This is being countered by the withdrawal of international publishing and media houses from the Slovak market mainly for financial reasons.

There are a number of influential independent media outlets who are seeing success with new methods of revenue generation and subscription models in order to maintain their independence from oligarch control.

The journalistic integrity of the public media has been undermined due to years of government control and an ongoing distortion of accurate narratives in order to serve the political interests of those in power.

International players are continuing to influence the media information ecosystem. Pro-Russian websites are prolific with disinformation and the influence of Czech politicians and oligarchs on the media is also on the rise.

Journalists continue to report campaigns of intimidation and fear with harassment against media platforms and individual journalists often recorded. Politicians continue to attack the media verbally for their work.

The Covid-19 pandemic has seen a growth of health disinformation website and anti-vaccine narratives in the Slovak public sphere. The media's role during the pandemic has shifted quite dramatically as result of political disinformation campaigns.

As a result of prevalent disinformation campaigns and a lack of accuracy, trust in the media is low in Slovakia. Social media giants and technology companies are doing little by way of fact-checking in order to alleviate public concerns and there appears to be a lack of distinction between mainstream media and information websites. Despite this, there is public support for investigative journalism.

¹ Reporters Sans Frontières (2020). *Press Freedom Index Slovakia*. [online] Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/slovakia> (Accessed 12 April 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The independent evaluation of the Slovak media landscape presented in this document is based on fieldwork conducted remotely by the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) between September 2020 and March 2021. It has been produced as part of a project developed in partnership with the Evens Foundation (EF) and the Fritt Ord Foundation (SFO). The [‘Building Trust in Journalism’](#) project aims to explore the condition and identify the needs of the media community in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Georgia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine in order to better define the challenges of contemporary journalism.

The report is based on a combination of desk research and key stakeholder interviews with media practitioners and experts from across the Slovak media landscape. Nine interviews were conducted with journalists, editors, academics and civil society organisations in Slovakia. The focus was on assessing the key challenges facing the media in Slovakia with a view to presenting a set of recommendations for ways of dealing with these issues. The EJN tried to include a broad spectrum of views and opinions from the media sector. However, conditions which emerged as a result of the pandemic and the Slovak government’s response meant that many stakeholders were unavailable for long interviews or comment.

All of the interviews for this report were conducted remotely over the phone or via online platforms. The Covid-19 public health crisis restricted travel to Slovakia to conduct the research. For this reason, the EJN are grateful to a number of Slovak media stakeholders who supported the production of this report by providing the required information, feedback and review in order to ensure that the nuances of the Slovak socio-cultural and political landscapes were fully captured.

This paper also draws on a number of other reports and research studies into the Slovak media. These include a report produced by the Centre for Media Data and Society (CMDS) at Central European University, [‘Media Influence Matrix: Slovakia’](#) which examined the main trends in the funding of the media in Slovakia, media policy, regulation and trends in technology and the media.² This paper also refers to the [EJN’s previous work](#) in assessing ethical and professional media practice in countries where conditions are challenging. A number of papers on hate speech, reporting on the pandemic, and media governance as well as on-going work with the RSF Journalism Trust Initiative inform the analysis in

this report.³ Similarly, the report draws on key academic paradigms used to study the media. These include political economy, sociology of news production as well as the media culture paradigm. Interview questions ranged from enquiry into business models, modes of governance, newsroom structures and hierarchies to factors, which are impacting on practice and content.

This paper does not claim to be a comprehensive study of the media in Slovakia. It is primarily based on the findings from interviews with additional input from Slovak stakeholders and experts in a peer review process. It aims to provide an external perception of the challenges that the media are facing, based on its own journalistic experience, ethical practices and academic vigour.

2 Dragomir, Marius (2020). *Media Influence Matrix: Slovakia*. CEU School of Public Policy. [online] Available at: <https://cmds.ceu.edu/sites/cmcs.ceu.hu/files/attachment/basicpage/1324/mimslovakiafund-ing2020.pdf> (Accessed 12 April 2021).

3 Ethical Journalism Network (2020). *Ethical Journalism Network*. [online] Available at: <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org> (Accessed 12 April 2021).

INTRODUCTION

In February 2018, the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancé were shot dead at their home in Veľká Mača, Galanta District in Slovakia. Kuciak had been working on a story which exposed systematic corruption at many levels within the state and made clear connections to an Italian organised crime syndicate. Investigations into the murder revealed that Kuciak had been killed for his investigative work yet, despite clear evidence which pointed towards powerful Slovak businessman Marian Kočner as the brains behind the horrific assassinations, the court did not find that the killing was ordered by Kočner. The case will be decided by the Supreme Court.

The killing of Kuciak and his fiancé sent shockwaves across Slovakia and sparked a wave of protests across Slovakia, the largest since the Velvet Revolution in 1989. The protestors called for a full investigation into the murders and the resignation of government and police officials. By the 15th of March 2018, the Prime Minister Robert Fico and his cabinet had all resigned from their positions. This mass mobilisation represented by both civil society organisations and young people is cited as a turning point, not only for Slovak media, but for the political class and society as a whole.

Slovakia scores highly on the Reporters Sans Frontières Press Freedom Index 2020, coming over seven places ahead of its Visegrad counterpart, Czech Republic, at 33rd with Poland and Hungary much further behind at 62 and 89 respectively. The establishment of the Slovak Republic in 1993 introduced constitutional provisions for a free press and to this day Slovakia has some of the most liberal media laws in Europe, for example the access to information law. However, corruption is rife and continues to mainly go unchecked by government despite an active environment of accountable investigative journalism. A culture of discrediting the media, perpetuated under the government of former Prime Minister Fico, is becoming entrenched, used by politicians as a means of gaining public support for unpopular and unsuccessful policies. This condition of undermining journalism is being further exacerbated with the growth of online trolling and digital harassment.

We reached the very bottom and it was a wakeup call. If the intention had been to threaten journalists it was exactly the opposite. They got angry and fought back.
– Journalist and media activist

Despite this, concerns over threats to media pluralism which was enabled after the fall of communism in Slovakia are growing. The withdrawal of international

investment from the media is seeing oligarch control and ownership of mainstream media becoming more widespread and a few business groups are dominating the private media sphere. Government control of the public broadcaster is also raising eyebrows with senior appointment processes and content both being subject to interference. The ubiquity and growing influence of websites which are categorically disseminating mis- and disinformation continues to impact on the narratives of the mainstream media and on audience trust.

There is some hope in the form of the independent news websites which are increasingly seen as important players in the Slovak public sphere. They are not only breaking ground in terms of investigative journalism and public interest content but are also pioneering new models of revenue generation which can establish some best practice for other countries in the region. Although media literacy levels are low in Slovakia, there is some evidence to indicate that there is an appetite to pay for quality independent journalism in particular that which is uncovering and tackling endemic corruption in Slovakia.

PART 1

A CONCENTRATED LEGACY MEDIA MARKET

The mainstream media market in Slovakia is less captured than that of its counterparts in Hungary and the Czech Republic although there are worrying signs of negative change. Despite existing legal measures to protect against monopoly and media concentration, in recent years there has been an inclination towards media consolidation in the hands of few key business players, individuals and the government which has not been dealt with by either the Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission (RVR) nor the Anti-Monopoly office. The RVR is the broadcast media regulator which also issues broadcasting licenses to the Slovak media. Its head is directly appointed by government with little oversight from Parliament. However, media independence is still a fundamental right in Slovakia despite these disquieting signs. Media laws in Slovakia are some of the most progressive in Europe and all of the stakeholders interviewed commented on their ability to work openly and transparently.

Even previous government of Mr Fico never tried to go the way that Orban and Kaczyński are going. He did attack media but he didn't try and buy or conquer them and touch the independence of media.

– Senior editor, mainstream media

I think that we have pretty good conditions for freedom of speech even though we were shocked by the murder. We still have a free media and professional journalists morally and ethically in radio and other forms even in the national television.

– Media activist

Television platforms are split between the public media broadcasting service and two main private players, TV Markiza Group and TV JOJ Group. The sale of TV Markiza to PPF Group, owned by Czech businessman Petr Kellner, by American company AT&T, was seen as a key event indicating the growing influence of oligarchs on the Slovak media scene.⁴ TV JOJ, owned by J&T business group, who are known to work with a number of political parties depending on who is in power, has been accused of using its platform and content in the business interests of the group.

⁴ Petr Kellner was killed in a helicopter crash on 29th March 2021. It is unclear what impact this will have on his business and media assets.

TV Markiza used to be American owned but they sold the group to a Czech oligarch who is the most powerful and richest man in country with business interests in Russia and China. There is a fear that he will influence TV Nova (Czech) and Markiza.

– Senior editor, mainstream media

The government controls the lion's share of public advertising revenue, the majority of which goes to the public broadcaster, Radio and Television of Slovakia, Rozhlas a Televízia Slovenska, (RTVS). This has seen the public broadcaster succumb to pressures from government at critical times such as elections.⁵ Government control of the public media has been further intensified through a number of controversial senior appointments which took place under the previous government of Robert Fico. In 2018, over thirty staff journalists resigned from RTVS in defiance at the selection of a senior management team with direct ties to the nationalist political party, Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana, SNS), who formed a coalition with Robert Fico's Direction – Slovak Social Democracy Party (SMER – slovenská sociálna demokracia, SMER-SD) following the 2016 election. Although the director general still remains in place and there are concerns that journalists were replaced with SNS sympathisers, the episode was viewed as another sign that journalism in Slovakia is fighting to remain independent.

The problem with the public broadcaster is that their journalistic integrity has been threatened and this does not portray the government in a good light.

– Academic

When the director of the public television changed three years ago, ten to fifteen of the best journalists left. This was a lesson as these people became heroes in the eyes of other journalists. It was a lesson in how to behave and these are important lessons which we don't take lightly.

– Senior editor, mainstream media

⁵ See the following report on media coverage of the 2020 Slovak elections for further details: <https://memo98.sk/article/the-media-coverage-of-the-2020-slovak-parliamentary-elections> (Accessed 6 May 2021).

In a meeting with Reporters Sans Frontières in Paris on 3rd February 2021, the former Slovak Prime Minister Igor Matovič and president of the Parliamentary Culture and Media Commission Kristián Čekovský discussed a future transition of the public broadcaster to allow for greater editorial independence following the events of 2018.⁶ Matovič resigned in March 2021 after disclosures of secret agreements with Russia to supply the Sputnik V Covid-19 vaccinations. Stakeholders interviewed for this report also commented on the declining quality of content from the public broadcaster with 'boring news and no will to engage in difficult issues.' They also commented that audiences were turning away from the public broadcaster. Recent research conducted by the Reuters Institute puts TV Markiza ahead of TV JOJ and RTVS respectively in terms of audience viewing figures, as it has been for the past two decades.⁷ The same study also found that RTVS was the most trusted news brand in Slovakia in 2020.

Penta Investments are another large business group with financial interests in the media, largely in print and online. The majority of Slovakia's newspaper market is privately owned cemented by the sale of *Nový Čas*, Slovakia most widely circulated newspaper formerly published by Ringier Axel Springer, in August 2018 to Anton Siekel, a known oligarch who has strong associations with Slovak business groups. When Penta acquired a sizeable portion of the *Denník SME* in 2014, also from Ringier Axel Springer, there were concerns about editorial interference which eventually led to the resignation of a number of senior editors who set up the now popular and well-respected newspaper and website, *Denník N*.

When the oligarch group Penta bought a 45% share of the Denník SME from the German publisher (Ringier Axel Springer) it was against the will of the owners which is the reason why people left and started Denník N. There is a minority owner at SME but they now have no influence on the content. – Senior editor, mainstream media

An interesting development in April 2021 saw Penta withdraw from the Petit Press Publishing house which publishes the *Denník SME* and co-owns the Slovak Spectator. The group sold its 34-percent stock to the Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF), a New York-registered non-profit investment fund for independent

media.⁸ Anecdotally it has been muted that Penta pulled their investment due to the work of the editorial team to maintain their independence from the investment group.

The reason Penta sold it is because they realised after 5 years that they could not use the SME to their advantage. Alexej Fulmek (editor-in-chief) tried so hard to get rid of them and he achieved it because of the wall that he built which was so big and buffer zone so big it didn't allow anything to get through, Penta did not influence the content. – Senior editor and activist

Like many of the oligarchs and business groups who are active in Slovakia, Penta Investments also have business and media interests in the Czech Republic. The Prime Minister of the Czech Republic Andrej Babiš is also known to be acquiring influence and media houses in Slovakia through Mafra, the publishing arm of his media conglomerate, Agrofert. In 2018, Babiš unsuccessfully litigated against *Nový Čas* for a report in which a former secret service employee made allegations that he had co-operated with communist Czechoslovakia's state secret service. Babiš is known for his use of intimidation to silence journalists and free press.⁹

Stakeholders were clearly concerned with the growing influence of oligarchs. However, they were keen to point out that Slovakia was nowhere near the conditions of media capture seen in Hungary or the Czech Republic. As it currently stands, there appears to be some political motivation to use the media. Business groups and oligarchs are seemingly driven by the financial and business benefits that owning media can grant them which is often linked to political interests.

8 Read more: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22643942/penta-financial-group-leaves-petit-press-six-years-after-hostile-takeover.html> (Accessed 6 May 2021).

9 Dragomir, Marius (2020). Media Influence Matrix: Slovakia. CEU School of Public Policy. [online] Available at: <https://cmds.ceu.edu/sites/cmcs.ceu.hu/files/attachment/basicpage/1324/mimslovakiafunding2020.pdf> (Accessed 12 April 2021).

6 RSF (2021). Slovak premier visits RSF, encouraged to turn his country into "press freedom model for Europe". RSF. [online] Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/news/slovak-premier-visits-rsf-encouraged-turn-his-country-press-freedom-model-europe> (Accessed 14 April 2021).

7 Newman, Nic (2020). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020*. Reuters Institute. [online] Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf (Accessed 15 April 2021).

PART 2

THE JÁNUS FACE OF ONLINE WEBSITES

As audiences turn away from newspapers, there is a growing demand and consumption of news via online websites and news portals, according to a recent report published by the Centre for Media, Data and Society at the Central European University.¹⁰ The report found that new technologies such as the greater access to smartphones is driving news consumption online. This is confirmed by the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020 which puts online news consumption as the popular in Slovakia at 79% although it should be noted that the report also showed that, in the last 3 years, news consumption has decreased overall.¹¹ In Slovakia, this situation is highly conflicted. Strong independent online news brands with a convincing investigative output that is calling power and corruption to account, on the one hand, compete with scurrilous information websites which spread mis- and disinformation, on the other.

Online websites such as Aktuality.sk, home to the work of Ján Kuciak before his untimely death, and *Denník N* are experiencing increased audience consumption and producing content that is accountable and impacting on the policy sphere. *Denník N*'s expose of former PM Matovič's plagiarism of his master's thesis, for example, saw the opposition party called a vote of no confidence (which he survived) in July 2020.¹² Interviews with journalists and editors at both of the websites for this report revealed a strong desire and propensity to challenge the growing power of cartels and mob-like groups in Slovakia.

It is our work to protect institutions. We have to challenge politicians who are against democracy or question the knowledge of scientists ... The return of the mafia is dangerous and we need to explain that we are trying to combat this. – Senior journalist, Aktuality.sk

We were pioneers in that (subscription models) when we started, nobody was doing that. It was very unique but because we were the best paper that time and we had the best authors, people were willing to pay. If they wanted to read something more than just news, but some good reporting, some good investigative pieces, they had to pay. So somehow we convinced readers to pay, it's quite unique. Because if you look on the region, you can see that in Czechia, it's very rare to pay for journalism. Similar in Poland. And it's almost zero in Hungary.

– Investigative journalist, *Denník N*

Denník N is showing great success in pioneering a subscription-based revenue model in order to maintain its independence. Although it began with a financial starting package from software company ESET, its subscription base has grown substantially in the years since its inception in 2014 and in 2018 it became the 'fourth most profitable player in the Slovak media with net earnings of some €204,000.¹³ *Denník N*'s success is inspiring independent websites and even newspapers to consider the benefits of reader-funded revenue models. In an environment where all of the public advertising revenue is controlled by the government, this is essential for the future of an increasingly captured media in Slovakia.

Slovakia was first of the V4 to start with website subscriptions models and it is because Slovak journalists have learned to fight for their future. – Senior editor, *Denník N*

Stakeholders at Aktuality.sk are also considering the importance of independent funding and suggested that artificial intelligence (AI) might open up avenues for foreign investment in the future:

10 Dragomir, Marius (2020). *Media Influence Matrix: Slovakia*. CEU School of Public Policy. [online] Available at: <https://cmds.ceu.edu/sites/cmcs.ceu.hu/files/attachment/basicpage/1324/mimsllovakiafund-ing2020.pdf> (Accessed 12 April 2021).

11 Newman, Nic (2020). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020*. Reuters Institute. [online] Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf (Accessed 15 April 2021).

12 Tomek, Radoslav (2020). *Slovak Premier Survives Ouster Vote over Plagiarism Charges*. Bloomberg.com. [online] Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-24/slovak-premier-survives-ouster-vote-over-plagiarism-charges> (Accessed 6 May 2021).

13 Dragomir, Marius (2020). *Media Influence Matrix: Slovakia*. CEU School of Public Policy. [online] Available at: <https://cmds.ceu.edu/sites/cmcs.ceu.hu/files/attachment/basicpage/1324/mimsllovakiafund-ing2020.pdf> (Accessed 12 April 2021).

We don't have a strong paywall. People can choose to donate or not. The public want things for free and we have to find a successful business model to address that. We are the last on the market who still make our content available for free and, if we change that, the public will lose their last channel of free relevant information.

They did also express some concerns however at the overall propensity for the Slovak public to pay for content and referenced their conflicted nature: one which wanted to see corruption tackled through good investigative work and another which did not understand the role of media in calling governments and authority to account.

Slovakia is divided in half: half still trust and depend on classic journalism and the other half is willingly consuming manipulative narratives from media and politicians. They know that it is considered disinformation but many people here are going through an anti-social behaviour phase and accepting this type of media.
– Media activist

Indeed, the success of independent platforms and investigative journalism is in marked contrast to what stakeholders described as 'conspiracy websites', characterised by mis- and disinformation, the consumption of which is high in Slovakia. These websites are making money from Google advertising, peddling false claims and conspiracies in order to drive traffic and thus revenue. Using press releases and information from news agencies as a form of disguise for false information, the main narratives of disinformation focus on: the Covid-19 pandemic and anti-vaccine rhetoric; anti-EU, anti-NATO and pro-Russian theories; anti-feminist, LGBT-QI+ and liberal narratives positioning them as an attack on Christian family values; far-right advocacy.

It started with Ukrainian conflict, spreading Russian propaganda which denied Russian involvement in the conflict and then spreading ideas about US involvement in the Ukrainian revolution. They favoured the Russian side of the conflict and portrayed Ukraine as fascists.
– Academic

Hlavné správy, Parlamentné listy and Zem a Vek are all influential websites which are known to disseminate mis- and disinformation on a regular basis. *Hlavné správy* is the 11th most visited website in Slovakia according to the Reuters Institute [Digital News Report 2020](#), coming in immediately after *Denník N*.¹⁴

A report published in May 2015 which explored the impact of pro-Russian disinformation campaigns in Slovakia found that disinformation was originating from multiple sources in addition to websites, mainstream media included.¹⁵ This was corroborated by stakeholders who confirmed that the public media in particular was becoming complicit in the spread of false narratives.

They are not only spreading pro-Russian narratives but are falsifying news of deaths from vaccines with no facts to substantiate their claims. – Senior journalist, independent media platform

News is the flagship of disinformation.
– Media activist

Stakeholders argued that the Slovak government changed its strategy towards the media during the pandemic, becoming a major player in the health disinformation wars in order to position itself as a beacon of strength. As cases and numbers became less positive in autumn of 2020, the government accused the media of working against the former PM Matovič and his Ordinary People and Independent Personalities movement (Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti, OĽaNO) in order to undermine their control. There was also a concern that other mainstream media platforms were repeating mis- and disinformation narratives.

There are some media that are owned by oligarchs – but only some – who have been successful in making those media spread the message. Most of the media owned by oligarchs are not doing this for political purposes but to drive audiences.
– Academic

14 Newman, Nic (2020). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020*. Reuters Institute. [online] Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf (Accessed 15 April 2021).

15 Smoleňová, Ivana (2015) The pro-Russian disinformation campaign in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Prague Security Studies Institute. [online] Available at: <https://www.rcmediafreedom.eu/Publications/Reports/The-pro-Russian-disinformation-campaign-in-the-Czech-Republic-and-Slovakia> (Accessed 15 April 2021).

The growth in disinformation from all sides is having a dangerous impact on the ground. Protests against the restrictions in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic turned violent in October 2020 as right-wing and Neo-Nazi groups justified their actions using Covid-19 and anti-vax conspiracy claims. Fake online profiles and Facebook groups are further contributing to the landscape for false news.

Some of it is hate speech. There are Russian influence operations but much of this homegrown – you don't need Russian operatives to do this when it exists already.

– Academic

If we look on V4 countries, pro-Russian sentiment is maybe the largest in Slovakia, unfortunately, and anti-NATO sentiment is huge. If Russia would organize some disinformation campaign or some operation, with the aim to provoke a referendum on step out of NATO, I think there is a small chance to be successful.

– Investigative journalist

While the claim above might be speculative, it does demonstrate the level of concern amongst stakeholders. Civil society initiatives are working hard to combat the disinformation landscape in Slovakia. The website konspiratori.sk was developed by a group of activists who lobby companies not to buy Google advertising on disinformation websites. The University of Matej Bel's Data and Society Lab is also working on social media regulation and at the level of the European Union. Some mainstream media have also been working to combat disinformation by including fact-checking sections in their portfolios, for example *Denník SME* and popular online entertainment website Topky.sk.

Stakeholders were also concerned that the increased consumption of online news and social media was having an impact on the possibilities for local and regional media. Although *Denník N* are said to be developing new opportunities for regional journalism, they have been struggling to make an impact during the pandemic:

We got a grant from Google that let us do more coverage from the regions but Covid-19 stopped it. We are planning now again to try and build local media.

With the majority of the mainstream media based in Bratislava and ongoing cuts to regional media, there is a concern that narratives will continue to be centralised and nationalistic. In an Ethical Journalism held on the 14th April 2021 entitled '[Misinformation in the](#)

[mainstream media](#)'¹⁶, Emily Bell from the Tow Centre for Journalism, Columbia University noted that

The loss of professional journalists at a local level, driven by the rise of Facebook and Google and aided by rollback of regulation, has meant that local coverage has become more national and more political, leaving the stage ripe for bad actors and misinformation.

Stakeholders in Slovakia confirmed that this situation was holding back Slovak journalism to a large extent in particular in underdeveloped regions of Slovakia which have been hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic.

16 Emily Bell, Professor of Professional Practice at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and the Director of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, Brooke Binkowski, managing editor, truthorfiction.com, James Ball (chair), global editor of The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, EJN trustee and author of *Post-Truth*. [online] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pzj4_YWcHY0 (Accessed 6 May 2021).

PART 3

THE IMPACT ON JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

The practice of attacking journalists was popular under the government of the former Prime Minister Robert Fico. In 2016, Fico began an aggressive concerted campaign to discredit the integrity of an active and accountable media, suggesting that journalists from *Denník SME* and *Denník N* amongst others were working against the interests of the Slovak Republic. Smear campaigns became commonplace under his premiership and, although this became less apparent after his resignation and the murder of Ján Kuciak, a similar pattern has emerged more recently as Matovič has turned on the media and their criticism of his handling of the pandemic.

The new Prime Minister doesn't like the media as they are hyper critical of his dealing of Covid. He benefited in the election but now he sees them as attacking him and being jealous that their party didn't make it to government. He isn't quite where Robert Fico was but I give him time. He is not directly attacking but he does insult journalists in press briefings suggesting that they are biased.

– Media activist

This is having an impact on public perceptions of the media. Media literacy levels are low in Slovakia and stakeholders spoke of the lack of understanding of the role that the media should play in a democratic society.

People think that if the media are not pro-government then they are against the country. – Senior journalist, independent media platform

There is also evidence to suggest that smear campaigns and harassment of journalists from nebulous sources are also growing in this environment. Journalists interviewed for this report spoke of intimidation and harassment received online as result of their work. A female journalist from *Denník N* reported being followed over a number of days following a verbal attack on her work by a leading politician. Another journalist told a similar story about his wife.

They amplify the hatred of a journalist. So my wife, she received a lot of really bad emails or messages on social

networks. They debate about her, it's very ugly, almost, you can say death threats or something like that. So yeah, it's very dangerous. Because, you know, you never know some crazy guy, you know, can harm you because, you know, because you've been labelled by some politician as an enemy of state or something. So yeah, it's dangerous, of course, and with our history of the recent murder of journalist and his fiancé. – Investigative journalist

Another investigative journalist stated the following:

In 2017 if somebody has asked me if I worked in a safe country for journalists, I would have said yes I do. As a member state of the European Union, I felt very safe. But after the assassination of my colleague that changed. Now I can't say if journalists are safe or not. All of the main media have taken steps to protect employees but for example my colleague found bullets in his mailbox last year so I had to call police to get him protection. The police refused to speculate on who might have done it which makes me a little bit nervous.

Despite this environment, all of the stakeholders talked of a sense of solidarity amongst media practitioners. Ethical journalistic principles were not considered to be undermined and in fact the murder of Kuciak and his fiancé had served to bring the media together, making them even more determined to tackle corruption and transparency in their work.

I think that we have a pretty good conditions for freedom of speech even though we were shocked by the murder. – Civil society activist

People who work in the media support a variety of political parties however they were united when reporting on the

corruption of the previous government. There was so much to report there that it became an activism. They kept their eye on the ball more than the politicians ... which is why many were perceived as polarising. – Academic

Although Slovakia is a small country, young aspiring career professionals were still motivated to join the journalistic profession. Journalism schools were seen to need better support and offer little by way of practical training, with a tendency to view public relations as the main source of media studies at higher education level. However, programmes to enable internships are emerging and there are a number of successful journalism prizes, for example [Novinarska CENA 2020](#), that raise the profile of strong investigative journalism and professional work. The Investigative Centre of Ján Kuciak (ICJK) was created in his honour after his death. Journalists at Aktuality.sk in particular worked with the centre and universities to give students hands on experience in their newsroom. Six of the first cohort of these students are now in full-time employment at media organisations.

As a consequence of the brutal murder of Ján Kuciak and his fiancé, some positive changes have appeared as a result. In the words of a senior editor

It was a bit of a fairy tale. Ján and his girlfriend were so innocent, they couldn't dig up any dirt on him, he lived like a monk. There was this evil on one side and then two innocent people brutally murdered. It was the tip of the iceberg. We needed this cleaning process. People were tired of reading things that were playing into the hands of extreme parties. The murder crossed all possible lines, they were young and innocent getting married. It was covered by the media, they showed unprecedented solidarity. The event helped to topple down PM Fico and we now have a fantastic president.

That said, there is a greater possibility for the media to consider how it covers issues related to marginalised groups in Slovakia, such as Roma communities. There is evidence to suggest that media framing and the use of stereotypes to report is contributing towards hatred and discrimination towards minority groups.¹⁷ This is also evident of hate speech in coverage of LGBTQI+

communities and their issues which needs to be addressed by the media. Slovakia has some of the worse LGBTQI+ rights in Europe and it does not permit same sex legal partnerships or adoption. The media has an important role to play in shifting the narrative and policy around these issues.¹⁸

17 Media image of Romani people in Slovakia: Generalizations and stereotypes, 2016. [online] Available at: <http://www.romea.cz/en/news/world/media-image-of-romani-people-in-slovakia-generalizations-and-stereotypes> (Accessed 15 April 2021).

18 Szekeres, Edward (2020). "They say we're the blight of the nation": LGBTQ activists fear the worst in Slovakia and Hungary. Kafkadesk. [online] Available at: <https://kafkadesk.org/2020/07/07/they-say-were-the-plight-of-the-nation-lgbtq-activists-fear-the-worst-in-slovakia-and-hungary> (Accessed 16 April 2021).



RECOMMENDATIONS

Stakeholders were all asked to provide their comments on spaces in the media which could benefit from greater development and support. It was evident that financial support and developing new business models that would work in the Slovak context was key. At the heart of this lies further support to identify new business models and support local media. Media literacy was also seen as an area in vital need of support from regional and international organisations.

In developing proposals for media development, it is important to reiterate the importance of consideration for the context of Central and Eastern Europe and Slovakia in particular. The situation for media in Slovakia is very different to that of its neighbours despite their emergence from similar contexts. In fact, Slovak journalists seem to have lessons to share with their regional counterparts on working in solidarity and developing innovative solutions to some of the challenges that the media are facing globally. It is important therefore that any media development interventions including the recommendations outlined below are developed in partnership with Slovak civil society and grassroots organisations and local partners in order to ensure that they build upon some of the evident successes that are emerging.

With this in mind, the following recommendations will focus on providing long term solutions to some of the issues that journalists and the media are currently facing in Slovakia. These recommendations are aimed at the policymakers, media, international NGOs and local CSOs and donor communities who are active in the support and development of freedom of press and the media. It is also worth considering supporting projects that continue to monitor media freedom and media pluralism such as the [Media Pluralism Monitor](#) (MPM), a tool which uses a set of indicators and data to assess the risks to media pluralism in given countries.¹⁹

Support independence in public media institutions

The role of public service media is one which is being debated on a global scale. Key challenges include establishing funding models that are sustainable and independent, producing content that is innovative but also in the public interest and attracting audiences that reflect the diversity of a nation. Similarly, an independent media regulatory body plays an integral role in supporting an environment of healthy pluralism.

There is an urgent need to address government interference in senior management appointment processes at both RTVS and RVR. This should start with a review

of existing legislation in order to ensure that parliamentary oversight exists with regards to appointment processes. There is a role for media development and media freedom organisations to play by working with government and its relevant institutions such as the Parliamentary Media and Culture Committee to ensure that an understanding of the benefits of public service broadcasting is clear. Developing clear independent editorial policies and internal consultations with senior management will also support a public media institution which is serving the public interest.

Further support for the development of new business models particularly at local media level

There is an appetite in Slovakia to support investigative journalism through subscription models and crowdfunding to a lesser extent. A focus on developing bespoke business plans for small local media outlets that allow them to build communities of support at a local level will allow grassroots media outlets to emerge and contribute to a healthier public sphere and dialogue. There is also an argument to support journalism and media platforms that are aimed at Slovakia's marginalised groups such as LGBTQI+ and Roma communities.

Regional networking The opportunity for peer-to-peer exchange with counterparts working in comparable environments is highly appreciated in the countries of the CEE region which have a common legacy and, therefore, shared challenges. Slovak journalists have a lot of positive experiences to share with their colleagues in Poland, Hungary and Czechia. Developing networks which can identify best practices and retain and propagate in-depth knowledge would support the region's media, local and national. Regional networking would also encourage cross-border, joint investigations and co-productions between groups and would allow the media to forge more lasting links.

Media literacy It is evident that there is a confusion amongst media audiences in Slovakia about the role that the media can play in supporting democratic principles and socially cohesive societies. Initiatives which engage the public in the creation and dissemination of media content will provide them with a greater understanding of the practices and decisions that journalists are making throughout the publication process. This will enable a greater trust in the mainstream media as it continues to challenge corruption and call the government to account. Initiatives such as *Denník N*'s development of an educational manual for high schools which described different forms of disinformation and educated teachers and students was a pioneering enterprise which was supported through crowdfunding. Similar projects should be explored. Media literacy programmes should be developed for adults and youth/secondary schools alike.

¹⁹ Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (2020). Media Pluralism Monitor. [online] Available at: <https://cmpf.eu/en/media-pluralism-monitor/mpm-2020> (Accessed 16 April 2021).

Higher education Media studies courses at universities in Slovakia tend to focus on teaching public relations rather than practical journalism education and skills. Better support should be given to further and higher education institutions who wish to change the current environment for the media and improve the quality of journalism in Slovakia in particular those outside of Bratislava in order to support local media. There is also an opportunity for university courses to focus more on the political economy aspect of the media and develop a greater aptitude for creativity and invention in developing alternative business models that might suit the Slovak context. However, core journalism skills including investigative and data journalism are also essential. Theoretical training should be supported by practical skills development in the form of internships and in-house training at media organisations. Training and internships outside of Slovakia for example in the UK, Germany and across Europe was also recommended by key stakeholders.

Security and safety Slovak journalists are dealing with aggressive attacks from the government and other sources in order to undermine their work. Smear campaigns are used a common form of silencing and scaring the media and there is some evidence that they might be gendered. These attacks need to be documented and work should be done to identify where these attacks are coming from and how they are orchestrated. Journalists and media practitioners in Slovakia should find regional and international networks of support in order to assist them in dealing with ongoing harassment. A number of online tools and courses to combat online harassment and defamation are available free of charge, from the International News Safety Institute (INSI), Dart Centre and the Global Investigative Journalism Centre (GIJN), which should be identified and eventually made available in Slovak.

ABOUT THE ORGANISERS

Ethical Journalism Network (EJN)

The Ethical Journalism Network works to promote media ethics, good governance and the self-regulation of journalism with the aim of strengthening independent journalism and building a responsible and ethical public sphere in an age where trust in the media is at an all time low.

www.ethicaljournalismnetwork.org



Evens Foundation

The Evens Foundation aims to contribute to rethinking and building a European reality committed to the values of diversity, freedom, responsibility and solidarity. We identify and support innovative ideas and achievements through our prizes and calls, initiate experimental projects bridging the gap between research and practice, and facilitate knowledge exchange through our lectures, seminars, debates and publications.

www.evensfoundation.be

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Fritt Ord Foundation

The Fritt Ord Foundation is a private non-profit foundation that is intended to protect and promote freedom of expression, public debate, art and culture. We work internationally, concentrating on projects directly related to freedom of expression and free journalism.

www.frittord.no



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