

Panagiotou Nikolaos
Nikezis Ilias (Eds)

Hate Speech Against Journalists

PJL
PEACE JOURNALISM LAB

with the support of



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.

Greece and Cyprus

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INTRODUCTION

In the ever-evolving landscape of media, the past decade has witnessed a disquieting decline in media freedom. Since 2012, there has been a concerning erosion of environments conducive to a free press, accompanied by a surge in various targeted attacks on the media. These assaults take multifaceted forms: from non-lethal physical violence to digital, legal, psycho-social, gender, and identity-based intimidation. Moreover, there's a worrying trend of state-led control over the media, often coupled with politically motivated efforts to undermine and exclude critical voices.

Yet, amidst this environment, a deeply concerning issue has largely evaded attention: the propagation of hate speech against journalists. On social media platforms, in content endorsed or even posted by politicians, and within public comments, there's been a proliferation of threats, insults and smear campaigns targeting those in the journalistic field.

Understanding the gravity of this issue becomes imperative for several reasons: it poses a significant threat to media freedom, it remains an under-researched area, and such intimidation severely impedes free expression, potentially chilling the overall environment for media freedom. In response to such hostility, journalists resort to self-censorship, leading to a distressing restriction in people's access to reliable and crucial information.

Countering this array of overt and covert threats necessitates a global reversal in the level of trust in media and journalists. Achieving this demands access to dependable data that mirrors the multifaceted challenges obstructing the work of journalists and impeding media freedom.

Yet, amidst this environment, a grievous issue has remained largely overlooked: the rampant propagation of hate speech targeting journalists. Across social media platforms and public discourse, these professionals face a deluge of threats, insults, and smear campaigns, often endorsed, or instigated by influential figures, including politicians. This wave of hostility poses a severe threat to media freedom, creating an environment where self-

censorship among journalists becomes a distressing reality, ultimately impeding the public's access to vital information.

Understanding the importance of this issue becomes imperative for several reasons. Firstly, it represents a significant impediment to media freedom, stifling the ability of journalists to operate independently and fearlessly. Secondly, it remains a glaring gap in research, necessitating urgent attention to comprehend its nuances and impacts. Lastly, such intimidation acts as a chilling force, hindering free expression and perpetuating an environment of distrust and apprehension.

To counter this pervasive threat, a major effort is required to reverse the declining trust in media and journalists. This necessitates access to comprehensive and reliable data that accurately reflects the multifaceted challenges obstructing journalistic endeavors and impeding media freedom.

In response to these critical concerns, an important and very original cross-border comparative research initiative has been undertaken across Greece, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and Serbia¹. Supported by the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, this collaborative effort aims to uncover and comprehend the diverse challenges faced by journalists and media outlets in these regions. By analyzing the unique socio-political contexts of each country, this initiative seeks to lay the groundwork for informed strategies that can effectively safeguard and fortify media freedom. Through a rigorous use of qualitative and quantitative data we aimed to critically examine a major topic that undermines free speech, journalistic work and most importantly the public sphere. These attacks are against the much-needed public debates that strengthen our democracies and safeguard our rights.

¹ The research originated as an idea and proposal from Peace Journalism Lab, School of Journalism and Mass Media Communications, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (leading partner), School of Journalism, University of Pristina Kosovo, School of Journalism Novi-Sad, Serbia, Blink 42-21 North Macedonia, Bulgaria

We would like to address our special thanks to Friedrich Naumann Stiftung Greece-Cyprus Representation and most specifically to Aret Demirci, Alona Tatarova, Eleni Siapikoudi for supporting this innovative research and effort.

DEFINING HATE SPEECH AGAINST JOURNALISTS

Regrettably, a reality for journalists across regions is the distressing encounter with hate speech throughout their professional careers. The frequency of such reprehensible behavior often correlates with the specific domain or the nature of cases they cover. Compounding this issue is the unchecked growth of online platforms, serving as fertile breeding grounds for the proliferation and accommodation of such deplorable conduct. What exacerbates the situation further is the distressing reality that hate speech, unleashed via social media platforms, transcends the confines of the professional realm, infiltrating the sanctity of journalists' homes and family environments.

The spectrum of hate speech against journalists encompasses various forms, ranging from verbal assaults to relentless online harassment and even menacing physical threats. Moreover, the motivations propelling such behavior are as diverse as they are troubling, spanning from intricate economic or political interests to the inexplicable wrath of ardent sports fans.

Of paramount importance is recognizing that hate speech, particularly when directed at journalists, wields a profound impact on both their personal and professional lives. The repercussions in their personal lives fluctuate based on the severity of the harassment endured. In some instances, it causes discomfort, compelling journalists to explain their professional choices within their close-knit circles. However, in far graver scenarios, they face direct threats to their safety and the safety of their families. Professionally, the pressure mounts significantly, forcing many to engage in self-censorship, sacrificing their journalistic integrity and independence in favor of appeasing those who threaten them.

Despite this distressingly prevalent circumstance, journalists find themselves predominantly isolated in dealing with these abhorrent behaviors, receiving inadequate—sometimes nonexistent—support from their publishers, their organizations, or professional associations. Equally disheartening is the absence of any robust policy frameworks or regulations aimed at addressing these pervasive issues in the majority of countries.

This situation not only undermines the fundamental principles of press freedom and journalistic integrity but also poses a severe threat to the safety and well-being of those dedicated to upholding the public's right to information. Urgent collective action is imperative to safeguard journalists against such unjust treatment and to uphold the essential role they play in fostering informed societies and upholding democratic values.

Taking into account all the above, we have come to the following definition to be used for the needs of the project:

“Hate speech against journalists refers to any form of communication, expression, or behavior that targets journalists specifically due to their profession, with the intention of inciting, promoting, or justifying hatred, discrimination, or harm towards them. This can include verbal, written, or online attacks, threats, intimidation, or harassment aimed at undermining the work, credibility, or personal safety of journalists. Hate speech against journalists often involves derogatory language, false accusations, personal attacks, and attempts to intimidate or silence journalists in their pursuit of truth, freedom of expression, and the dissemination of information to the public. It poses a significant threat to press freedom, democratic principles, and the ability of journalists to carry out their vital role in society.”

THE INITIATIVE

Acknowledging the importance of the issue outlined earlier as well as the pressing circumstances, and recognizing the absence of adequate responses, Peace Journalism Lab, School of Journalism and Mass Media Communications Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, has taken this cross-border comparative research initiative. Faced with the imperative to shed light on an issue overlooked, PJJL aims not only to scrutinize but also to amplify the urgency of this matter—an issue that demands immediate attention through the establishment of robust policy frameworks and regulations.

In collaboration with Blink 42-21 from North Macedonia, Blue Link from Bulgaria, and academic partners University of Prishtina from Kosovo and University of Novi-Sad Serbia, a concerted effort was launched. Together, we have originated a cross-border, collaborative research initiative aimed to analyse the situation in the region.

The project adopts a dual approach. Firstly, a comprehensive study employing a hybrid methodology of qualitative and quantitative data collection aims to catalog and portray the challenges confronting journalists and media entities in the region. This multifaceted examination seeks to unravel the complex problems faced by journalists and media professionals.

Secondly, in align with the research, we have undertaken the production of podcasts in diverse languages. These podcasts serve as a vehicle to disseminate critical insights and perspectives garnered from the research findings. Additionally, a strategic social media campaign has been implemented, aimed not only to promote the initiative but also to foster public consciousness and engender a heightened awareness on the issue.

This cross regional and comparative effort aspires not only to bring this issue to the forefront of public discourse but also to catalyze tangible actions towards the formulation of comprehensive policies aimed at safeguarding the integrity, safety, and autonomy of journalists across these regions. By advocating for awareness and engagement, we endeavor to foster a conducive environment where journalists can operate without fear or undue influence,

ensuring the unimpeded flow of information and the upholding of democratic principles.

Through collaborative efforts and informed advocacy, we aspire to instigate a transformative change—one that secures the invaluable role of journalism in safeguarding truth, transparency, and the fabric of democratic societies.

CASES OCCURRED IN THE REVIEWED COUNTRIES

An extensive review of pertinent cases from the examined countries in recent years has revealed a proliferation of incidents.

In the Republic of North Macedonia², we have come across cases such as the ones against, Ognen Janeski (TV 24, verbal threat, Skopje, 27.06.2023: The journalist was attacked by an unknown person), Nevri Ademi (TV Polog, Physical attack with an axe against journalist Nevri Ademi and cameraman Zbulim Maksuti, Skopje, 16.02.2022), Maja Jovanovska (IRL, Verbal attack and abusive words towards the journalist, Skopje, 03.06.2022), Furkan Saliu (TV Klan, The explicit death threat addressed to the journalist on the Twitter social network, Skopje 08.07.2022: The journalist was attacked by a Twitter account named "@narco_girl") and many more, in a really long list of similar incidents.

In Kosovo³, we have come across cases such as the threats toward journalist Alban Selimi, (Pristinë, 16.03.2023: through Facebook, journalist Selimi announced that someone tried to intimidate him, but they did not achieve it), threats to journalists of Radio Gorazdevac in Kosovo, death threats and threats to physical safety against workers of various media outlets, including

² Data from <https://safejournalists.net/?s=Threats+Macedonia> and <https://znm.org.mk/povreda-na-novinari/>

³ Data from <https://safejournalists.net/?s=Threats+Pristina> and <https://safejournalists.net/?s=Threats+Kosovo>

Kosovo Online and Adria Media Group, insults and threats against journalist Bujar Vitija, (Prishtinë, 12.01.2023) and many more.

In Bulgaria⁴, we had cases as the one of Deutsche Welle Journalist Emilia Milcheva, who was targeted by the Police and Vazrazhdane Party⁵. Moreover, the case of Journalist Sonia Koltuklieva, who was harassed online⁶, and the Defamation Lawsuit against Investigative Website Bivol⁷.

Serbia⁸, has witnessed similar concerning situations, exemplified by online threats towards TV Host Ivan Ivanovic and his family, and by the case of journalist Zaklina Tatalovic of N1 television, who was threatened and harassed on Twitter. In the messages she received, it was stated, among other things, that she should be hanged and burned at the guillotine, and she was called derogatory names. In another message, the sender hoped that “the Russians will not stop only at the Ukrainian Nazis but will come for people like the journalist and others like her”.

Nonetheless, there have been many cases in Greece, including the distressing incident with Giorgos Christides⁹, correspondent of *Der Spiegel*, who faced a barrage of online abuse, exemplifying the digital perils journalists confront. The targeting of media outlets such as SKAI and the attacks on the offices of Real News and Real FM in firebomb and arson incidents, coupled with

⁴ <https://www.mapmf.org/explorer?q=Bulgaria&f.project=MFRR+project+-+extended+countries&f.year=2020&f.country=Bulgaria>

⁵ <https://fom.coe.int/en/alerte/detail/107638788;globalSearch=false>

⁶ <https://fom.coe.int/en/alerte/detail/107637953;globalSearch=false>

⁷ <https://fom.coe.int/en/alerte/detail/107637040;globalSearch=false>

⁸ <https://safejournalists.net/?s=threats+Sarajevo>

⁹ <https://www.mapmf.org/alert/25148>

instances of physical harassment of journalists reporting at Athens Economic University, are alarming manifestations of press intimidation.

REPORTS

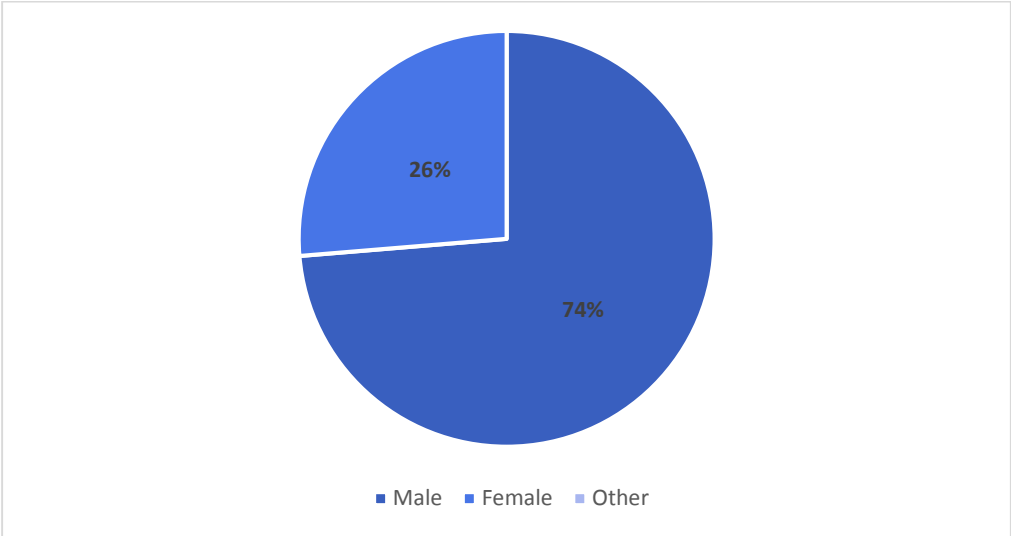
The methodological approach combining surveying and interacting with journalists who faced hate speech cases, was chosen to uncover insights, to illuminate the multifaceted challenges faced by journalists, and to understand the profound ramifications of hate speech on free speech and democracy. Through these surveys and interactive sessions, our pursuit has been to discern the interplay between hate speech, press freedom, and its impact on society at large.

The findings derived from the extensive research are detailed in the following pages. These results not only paint a comprehensive picture of the adversities journalists encounter but also provide insights into the broader implications for democratic societies grappling with the pernicious effects of hate speech. They underscore the imperative for concerted efforts to protect and fortify the pillars of free and independent Media, and to uphold the principles of democracy.

GREECE

QUESTIONARY FINDINGS

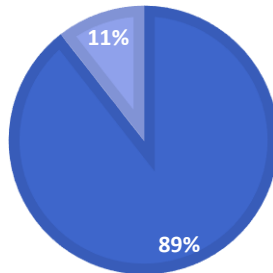
A total of 19 journalists, 14 men and 5 women, with more than 8 years of professional experience, replied to the questionnaire. While the initially intended sample size for the study was considerably larger, the limited participation may itself be a noteworthy finding. This could potentially suggest that professional journalists in Greece either lacked confidence in the transformative impact of such an initiative or exercised caution in sharing such sensitive information."



The vast majority of the participants (89,5%), declared that the had personally experienced or witnessed hate speech targeting journalists in their professional career.

HAVE YOU PERSONALLY EXPERIENCED OR
WITNESSED HATE SPEECH AGAINST
JOURNALISTS DURING YOUR PROFESSIONAL
CAREER?

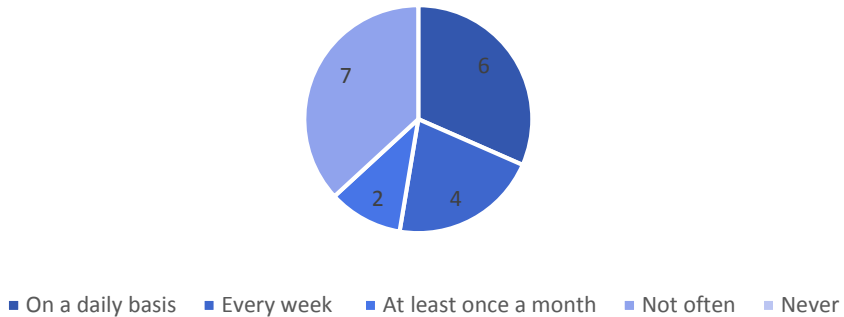
■ Yes ■ No



Regarding incidents of verbal or physical attacks, participants reported instances of violence involving employers, citizens, and political figures. Specifically, there were allegations of sexual harassment, demeaning behavior, and threats of dismissal by employers. Additionally, journalists faced insults and death threats from citizens while performing their professional duties, particularly during sports events and demonstrations. One prevalent claim is that they are subjected to bribery by centers of power. Furthermore, they assert that politicians attempt to exert influence, apply pressure, and occasionally issue threats.

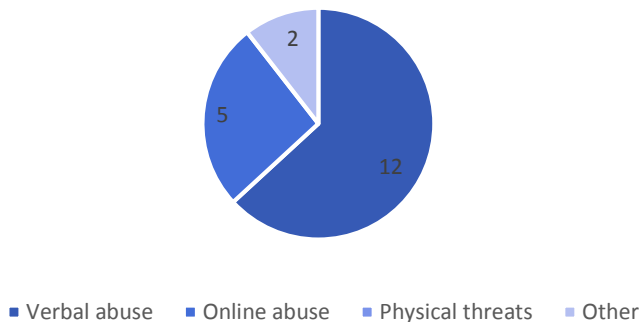
A significant 31.6% of the participants indicated that they encounter incidents of hate speech in the workplace on a daily basis, while 21.1% reported such incidents on a weekly basis. Additionally, 36.8% stated that they do not frequently encounter hate speech, and 10.5% reported facing it at least once a month.

How often do you encounter hate speech against journalists in your work environment (online or offline)?



Regarding these kinds of attacks, the majority (63.2%) stated that they usually face verbal abuse and 26.3% various types of online abuse, while 10.5% dealt with some different kind of abuse.

What forms does hate speech against journalists usually take? (e.g. verbal abuse, cyberbullying, physical threats)



An important finding was that 52.6% of the participants stated that they have been supported by their professional associations or journalists' unions.



The motivations behind hate speech targeting journalists encompass a range of complex factors. Nearly 79% of respondents attribute this hostility to suspicions about journalists' vulnerability to influence from centers of power. Additionally, 58% highlight a widespread misunderstanding of the fundamental role and responsibilities that journalists play in society. Around 32% emphasize the role of hate speech perpetuation through the echoing of views held by political figures. Meanwhile, 26% identify unethical or unprofessional practices among certain journalists as contributing factors to the proliferation of hate speech against the profession.

The findings regarding motivations behind hate speech targeting journalists reveal a multifaceted landscape of influences and perceptions that contribute to this hostility. Let's delve deeper into each identified factor:

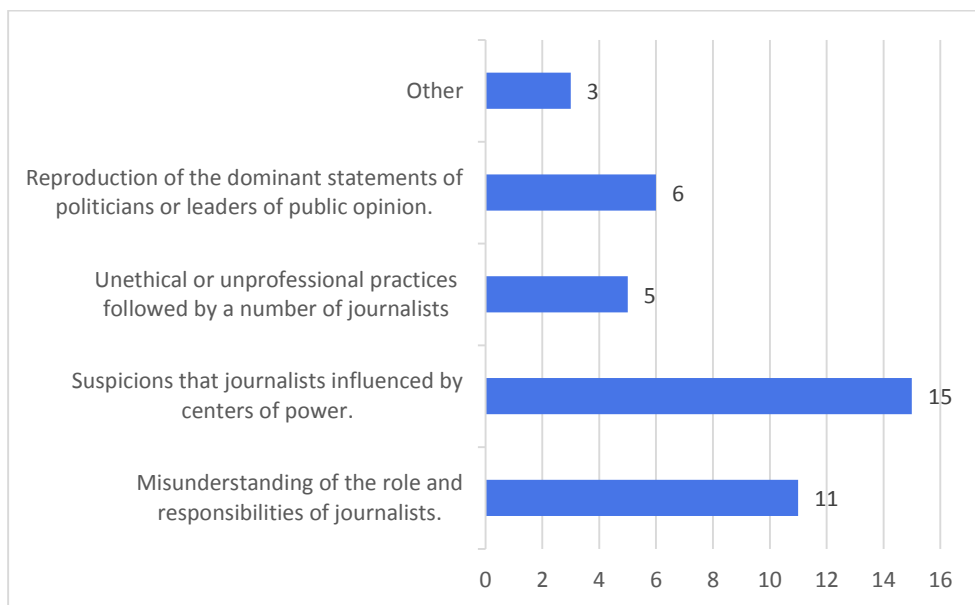
1. **Suspicious of Influence from Centers of Power (79%):** This high percentage suggests a prevalent concern among respondents regarding journalists' susceptibility to external influences, particularly from powerful entities such as government bodies, corporations, or special

interest groups. This suspicion might stem from perceived biases, compromised reporting, or conflicts of interest, eroding trust in journalistic independence.

2. **Misunderstanding of Journalists' Role (58%):** The significant number highlighting a misunderstanding of journalists' fundamental role indicates a lack of awareness or education about the crucial function journalists serve in society. It suggests that a considerable portion of the public might not fully grasp the responsibilities and ethical obligations journalists uphold in delivering accurate and unbiased information.
3. **Echoing Views of Political Figures (32%):** This finding underscores the impact of political rhetoric and the replication of views propagated by political figures. When influential leaders express disdain or animosity toward journalists, it can fuel a climate of hostility and normalize hate speech directed at the profession.
4. **Unethical or Unprofessional Practices (26%):** The identification of unethical behavior within journalism as a contributing factor points to internal challenges. Instances of misconduct, sensationalism, or lack of adherence to ethical standards by some journalists might tarnish the reputation of the entire profession, leading to increased hostility from the public.

This comprehensive breakdown highlights the intricate interplay between external influences (such as political rhetoric and suspicions of external influence) and internal factors (like ethical lapses within journalism) contributing to hate speech against journalists.

This analysis by Greek journalists highlights the intricate web of motives driving hate speech against their community. It emphasizes the need for a nuanced approach in tackling these underlying causes, reinforcing journalistic integrity, and preserving the crucial role of journalists within society.



Almost half of the respondents noted that the hate speech incidents they encounter in their workplace have limited impact on their personal and professional lives. However, among those who recognized its influence, they cited instances of self-censorship, emotional outbursts, and a sense of self-doubt regarding their work. Consequently, they reported grappling with negative emotions and heightened anxiety levels.

When questioned about the measures taken by the organizations they work for, a significant percentage stated that no action is being taken. Those who reported receiving support, it was primarily emotional, and some mentioned public condemnation. Only one respondent indicated that legal measures have been taken.

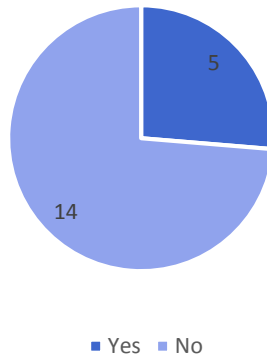
Regarding the measures that should be implemented, respondents propose the following: 1) prompt condemnation by political and other public actors; 2) the media outlet should not contribute in the dissemination of hate speech rhetoric through derogatory statements/actions; 3) enactment of a new framework for dealing with the most serious threats by the authorities; 4) introduction of media literacy courses in schools; 5) psychological, legal and

other support from the media, associations and the state. Additionally, respondents highlight the need of an official, reliable, and anonymous database to record and assess the situation.

It is worth noting that many journalists believe that there is no mutual support among journalists even in such incidents. Nearly half of the respondents were not aware of organisations and networks that could provide support to journalists threatened or harassed. The rest mentioned journalists' unions, Peace Journalism Lab of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Reporters without Borders, ImedD, ECPMF and IPI.

An overwhelming majority, 73.7% of the participants, indicated they have not received any training on effectively responding to hate speech or online abuse. Remarkably, only one respondent found such training significantly helpful. This finding highlights a critical gap in preparedness within the surveyed group, where a substantial majority lack the necessary training to address hate speech or online abuse. The contrast in the perception of training effectiveness, with only one respondent finding it significantly helpful, underscores the potential inadequacy or lack of accessible, impactful training programs.

Have you participated in any training or seminars aimed at tackling hate speech or cyberbullying?

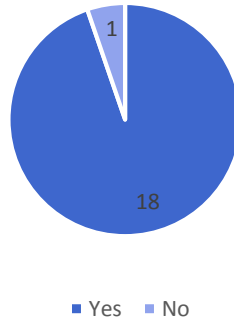


An overwhelming majority of the respondents (94.7%) have observed shifts in both the intensity and the manifestations of hate speech against journalists over recent years. Their collective perception resonates with a unanimous sentiment: the incidents have become more pervasive and severe. These alterations in the landscape of hate speech are attributed predominantly to the rise of social media platforms and the proliferation of misinformation.

The consensus among the surveyed journalists underscores the concerning escalation in both the frequency and the severity of hate speech incidents. Only two individuals perceive a decrease in the intensity of such incidents when compared to previous years.

The prevalent sentiment among Greek journalists emphasizes the urgent need for immediate actions and strategies to counter the impact of hate speech, particularly within the evolving dynamics of social media and the dissemination of misinformation.

Have you noticed changes in intensity or forms of hate speech against journalists in recent years?



Regarding strategies to effectively combat hate speech, feedback highlighted the necessity for strong engagement of journalists' associations, institutional bodies, and European organizations. A prevailing sentiment suggested the need for a public denouncement of unprofessional conduct within journalism circles. The rationale behind this proposal is to discourage the targeting of journalists by publicly condemning such behavior, thereby setting a precedent for acceptable professional conduct.

Furthermore, it is crucial to highlight that from the gathered responses, a prevailing belief emerged suggesting that incidents of hate speech targeting journalists might persist despite concerted efforts to address them. This perspective underscores a widespread concern regarding the enduring nature of hate speech in the field of journalism, indicating a recognition of the formidable challenge in completely eradicating such incidents

The plea for involvement from journalistic associations and authoritative bodies, coupled with the acknowledgment of the persistent nature of hate speech incidents, emphasizes the intricate landscape within which efforts to mitigate hate speech against journalists must operate. Addressing this multifaceted issue necessitates a collaborative and sustained approach,

incorporating both proactive measures to condemn unprofessional behavior and a pragmatic understanding of the enduring challenges posed by hate speech in journalism.

FOCUS GROUP WITH GREEK JOURNALISTS

A focus group discussion involving Greek journalists took place on September 11, 2023, as part of the 'HATE SPEECH against journalists' project. The group comprised six professional journalists (five males and one female). Each participant shared personal experiences of harassment, assault, or physical attacks encountered during their reporting endeavors. Notably, all six participants are seasoned professionals in the field of journalism, bringing diverse backgrounds and holding distinct roles within their respective media outlets. To ensure security, participants are identified solely by their initials: PM, a columnist at a daily newspaper; GH, a correspondent with foreign media; XN, a field reporter affiliated with a private broadcaster; DH, a unionist; SP, serving as both a field reporter and editor at the Public News Agency; and KA, an editor associated with the Public Broadcaster

Participants were asked to contribute with their testimonies and views in discussing the following topics:

1. The different forms of hate speech journalists have to cope with.
2. The different ways journalists respond to harassment and attacks.
3. Understanding the nature of the problem.
4. The main causes.
5. The consequences on the journalists' work.
6. Suggested measures and actors to take action.

1. The different forms of hate speech

All participants were able to identify numerous situations and cases when they were harassed or attacked. However, all of them agreed that they consider these specific cases parts of an underlying hostility against them because of their profession. The range of cases they mentioned as most indicative is rather wide:

XN had his hand broken by villagers in Euboea, while reporting on the wildfires there. Residents considered the media coverage inadequate and they blamed the journalist for deliberately not reporting early enough in order for fire workers to arrive on the spot. “Journalists are only interested in reporting bad news” they said to XN.

PM recounted multiple incidents of being attacked, including having his car broken into while delivering speeches at universities and experiencing assaults on the streets of Athens.

KA mentioned the case of journalists working for the public broadcaster in Thessaloniki collectively blamed for being “anti-patriots”, because the local TV station did not broadcast live a major demonstration against the so called Prespa agreement of 2017 on the use of the name North Macedonia by Greece’s neighbouring country. After that, and for a long time, journalists carrying microphones with the logo of the public broadcaster were harassed by citizens or threatened when reporting different stories. “Journalists often take the blame for decisions made by the media owners or managers”, KA says.

DH mentions the case of the powerful mayor of the city of Volos who publicly harassed a female journalist using clearly sexist terms. When she took legal action against him, the mayor expanded his verbal attacks against those defending her, including DH who then was the president of the local journalists union. DH was even arrested when a quarrel escalated within the court’s premises.

GH, raised the issue of Greek journalists working for foreign media being treated as “traitors of their own nation/country”, when reporting on situations

that could harm the country's reputation abroad. He himself was harassed and attacked multiple times, in particular when reporting migration stories. "It was impossible for correspondents to rent a car on islands where they've been to report on migration. Rental companies held it for granted that the vehicle would be broken by extremists".

SP faced persistent harassment both online and offline following her reporting on the refugees in Idomeni in 2016, which was the largest makeshift camp for refugees at that time. It began with messages received from an academic who used extremely sexist language, accusing her of being a traitor promoting an 'Islamists' invasion in Greece' and alleging she was an agent of an Arabic country (SP speaks Arabic)."

2. The ways that journalists respond

Discussants responded in different ways to verbal threats and physical attacks. XN considered such situations part of the profession and decided not to bring the issue on at all, while others preferred to make it public and ask for support. However, SP mentioned that at the time she was totally unprepared, with no prior knowledge or training, and therefore unable to respond. When a wave of harassing messages started to reach her inbox, she started replying to some of the senders only to get blocked by them, while more and more fake accounts continued to send her harassing messages, even death threats. "I should have done more, but I didn't know what to do, and I was always telling myself that reporting comes first".

GX identified the withdrawal from all social media activity as a measure he and many of his colleagues decided to take to protect themselves from getting overstressed with managing all the exchanges of hateful messages.

Journalists Unions and international Press Freedom Organisations were mainly the ones that journalists have been asking support from. However, local partners/actors of Social Dialogue and even online communities often offered their support to journalists harassed.

However, discussants pointed out the growing but still inadequate awareness about the issue, and the need to have the journalists' community updated about the available tools and organizations they can turn to for support.

3. Understanding Hate Speech against Journalists and media professionals

The rhetoric about the need for non-systemic Media, as occurred during the pandemic (mainly through the anti-vaccinates groups) and other situations when certain political or social groups tended to challenge facts and data provided by science or by institutional bodies formed the background of the phenomenon discussed. The replacement of ID documents in Greece with cards supposedly containing surveillance micro-chips, the so-called Prespa Agreement over the name of the North Macedonia, have been other exemplary topics that fueled this kind of hate rhetoric against journalists. Political extremism also feeds the narrative of Media and journalists echoing the dominant/ systemic political actors, which in countries with a strongly polarized political system, as is the case with Greece, creates conflict and cancels all options of constructive dialogue. The role of journalism in this environment has been an important point of the discussion when it came to understanding the nature of the problem. "Journalists should have rejected the perception of them as the so-called fourth estate" PM said. "Those in power should always expect violent reactions. We need to remind people that our role is to report and not to make things happen because we enjoy some extraordinary power. We also need to make clear that we are not the ones exclusively influencing the public opinion". KA remarked though that influencing the views of society is part of the journalistic profession, and the use of Social Media platforms turned the journalists' right to express political views into a tool for those in power to orchestrate attacks against them.

Deliberately blurring the line between media workers and media owners was also identified as an element used to feed the narrative about journalist not servicing the truth but promoting their own political or financial agendas. GH introduced the interesting distinction between the hate speech rhetoric exercised by individuals or groups of "ordinary people", often in a crisis situation, and cases of organized groups of people executing a well-prepared online attack under someone's guidance. Moreover, we have a very different

situation when institutional bodies or individuals in position with political power attack journalists or support/encourage attacks against them.

XN suggested that the political identity of the persons/groups attacking journalists is also important, and that in the polarized Greek society, attacks originated from far-left groups is less despised than those coming from the far right part of the political spectrum. Journalists themselves often attack other members of their professional community. Sometimes hate speech exists within the newsroom, often disguised as competitive attitude.

All discussants agreed that the phenomenon becomes even harsher when it comes to female journalists. The sexism factor makes the problem even more complicated, multiplies the attackers and makes it more difficult to identify the motivation of targeting.

4. Main Causes

While all the above points (03) describe the way that hate speech against journalists is demonstrated and how it can escalate in the form a physical assault, when it comes to the causes of the problem, participants identified the following elements:

Distrust in News and the Media created the conditions for hate speech against journalists to grow, while the social media platforms have been extremely useful tools for it to be disseminated and multiplied.

However, people's disdain for journalism should not be seen as disengaged from the dominant trend observed (and measured) in many countries to challenge all institutions. On the contrary, seeing it within this framework makes it easier to explain a strong paradox, pointed out by PM: "If people discredit journalists that strongly, why do they even bother to hate them?"

As for the social media factor, platforms not only operate as a multiplier of the above-mentioned disdain, but when it comes to regulation and protective measures, journalists are less protected than other professional groups.

Institutional actors often wield a calculated strategy, fostering a climate of distrust in the media landscape. Their objective? Gaining an added stranglehold over the dissemination of information, thereby amplifying their sway and advancing their agendas. This deliberate undermining of media credibility blurs the line between a calculated approach to information control and the dangerous tolerance of hate speech against journalists. This insidious manipulation of public perception not only compromises the integrity of journalistic endeavors but also jeopardizes the very essence of an informed society.

The convergence between these strategies—fueling distrust in media and condoning hate speech against journalists—represents a precarious juncture. It's a junction where the boundaries of responsible governance, ethical journalism, and the safeguarding of democratic principles become alarmingly blurred. The consequence? A fractured public trust, further exacerbated by the specter of hate speech targeting those who endeavor to uphold truth and transparency.

Within the professional community of journalists, however, there remains a gap in effective action. Insufficient measures have been taken to staunch the proliferation of hate speech brewing within newsrooms. This void in proactively addressing and discouraging such abhorrent behavior underscores a systemic flaw. It's a flaw that not only imperils the well-being of journalists but also undermines the collective integrity of the journalistic profession.

There is a pressing need for robust internal mechanisms within news organizations—an infrastructure fortified by ethical guidelines, proactive policies, and a culture that unequivocally condemns hate speech. Only through concerted efforts within journalistic circles can the toxic undercurrent of hate speech be stemmed, preserving the essence of a free press and upholding the critical role journalists play in fostering a vibrant and informed society.

5. Consequences on the journalists' work.

All discussants admit that experiencing verbal and/or physical attacks affected their work. PM dropped classes he was teaching at universities,

ceased visiting certain areas in Athens and prefers to stay at home when demonstrations are on.

“Whenever I visited a class, they’d break my car or throw eggs at me” he says. However, he considers a secondary effect even more important: he realized that the attacks blurred his judgement to the extent that could produce unfair reporting. XN Feels that his effort to stay safe and away from certain groups while covering a demonstration is already a restriction to his reporting. Still, he suggests that not making big noise about cases of harassment but trying to silently use them instead to gain additional access to sources and information is another option. “When you make a big issue of it, you probably make it trendier” he says. Although DX confirms that sometimes he handled situations of assault silently and indeed managed to publish some extra stories, he clearly states that on the long term self-censorship is what you get.

"Not all journalists can cope in the same manner. A lot of journalists were silenced because of the orchestrated verbal attacks against the public broadcaster” comments KA, while GX stresses out the element of fear, in particular among female journalists, who might receive hundreds of rape threats. “The decision to leave social media, which a lot of female journalists made, is already restricting the impact of their reporting and definitely poses a threat to pluralism” he says.

6. Suggested measures and actors to take action

Discussants agreed on the following list of possible measures. Any form of hate rhetoric against journalists should be strongly discouraged and condemned by all institutional actors. Media owners and unions should develop policies and train journalists. Work needed to be done internally, within the journalists’ community, on how to reinforce elements of the professional community that would restore its reputation and rebuild bonds of trust with the audience. The role of all institutional actors should in this reform process should be reviewed. Journalists Unions need to make their utmost to reestablish the profession’s credibility. Institutional actors should not only monitor the situation but also develop tools to respond adequately and immediately when cases occur, and offer practical and/or psychological support to journalists harassed or attacked. Online platforms should develop

preventive mechanisms. Legislative measures should be introduced provided that they don't pose any threats.

Conclusions

The matter of trust in journalism, within the framework of the need to reverse the overall disdain for institutions, is the biggest challenge that the media ecosystem is facing. Hate speech against journalists is one of the side effects of discrediting institutional values, including journalism as a public good. Hate speech against journalists can lead to harassment, assaults and physical violence against them. When journalists are forced to work in such a hostile and dangerous environment, their reporting is affected, mainly because they censor themselves in an effort to feel safer.

There is larger yet still not adequate awareness about the matter within the community, but still not enough measures are in place. Internet platforms carry big responsibility for the unfortunate situation and need to implement measures to protect journalists in particular from being harassed online. Media owners and journalists' unions need to take advantage of the tools and the mechanisms available by different organizations, in order to set policies and provide training to journalists on how to respond when threatened or harassed online or offline. However, as all discussants agreed, all of the above would not work unless the trust in journalism is sufficiently restored.

QUESTIONARE

Our survey aimed to highlight Bulgarian Journalists experiences with hate speech, the contextual factors surrounding such incidents, and their perspectives on these occurrences. Of the surveyed journalists, five were women, and two were men. All participants have a wealth of experience, with over eight years in the field of journalism, and they all hail from Bulgaria. The represented media entities and organizations of the participants encompass a diverse spectrum. This synthesis of participants from various media backgrounds offers a rich and multifaceted perspective on the challenges and nuances associated with hate speech against journalists.

1. Have you personally experienced or witnessed hate speech targeting journalists in your professional career?

All respondents experienced hate speech against them throughout their professional career.

According to their description, the cases mentioned can be categorized either as trivial or as ad hoc intimidation. Instances of trivial hate speech are often linked to stereotypical slurs and a persistent negative attitude toward journalists, while ad hoc instances of hate speech are tied to specific events or situations. Examples of the former can be gleaned from the following accounts shared by respondents:

"I've personally encountered hate speech in the form of online comments following my publications."

"Fans of an investigative internet media outlet directed hate speech towards some TV journalists. This has also happened to me multiple times, not due to the content of my work (TV reports and articles), but solely because I am a journalist on a major television network".

"Various instances of name-calling and slurs, often tinged with hints of sexism."

The covid pandemic and protests against certain government's policies triggered ad hoc attacks as described from the following sampled accounts shared by respondents:

Due to my articles on health policy in the country, I became the subject of sponsored publications by one of the largest hospitals in Bulgaria."

"Throughout the Covid pandemic, I received numerous threats. I encountered hate speech from participants in protests while covering the demonstrations."

When queried about the frequency of their encounters with such hostility, four respondents answered "rarely," two responded that it occurs "at least once per month," and one respondent replied with "every week."

Five respondents identified the cases they encountered as "verbal abuse", and two respondents as "online harassment".

When queried if they have received any support from their employer/organization or professional associations when dealing with hate speech incidents, four of the respondents replied "no", and two of them replied "yes". One respondent shared an example of supportive practice: *"I received support from the Association of European journalists in Bulgaria. They sent an email to the hospital [that targeted the journalist in question with a smear campaign] and asked them why they offend me like that."*

Concerning the motivation behind hate speech against journalists, some respondents link it to the social milieu, while others connect it to the journalistic environment itself and the prevailing distrust toward it. Respondents in the first group mention "gravely negative attitudes, intolerance towards different opinions, a desire to silence diverse positions through fearmongering," or attribute reasons that are "similar to the motivations behind destabilization [of Bulgaria] through disinformation." According to one account bridging the perspectives of two respondent groups, "criticism is not always unfounded, but it often relies on stereotypical ideas

and harsh narratives that are popular in society... In general, the prevailing perception of Bulgarian journalists as incompetent, dishonest, and easily swayed has permeated society, evident in social media and private conversations."

Another viewpoint suggests that hate speech against journalists is rooted in *"the lack of trust in journalists in Bulgaria and the imposed perception that they are corrupt and dishonest. Many people hold similar opinions about doctors, policemen, prosecutors, and lawyers."* Furthermore, one respondent points to "a well-established belief in society that journalists are sell-outs, serving political and economic interests, and worst of all, neglecting to defend people's rights and interests."

Regarding the impact of hate speech on their personal and professional lives, respondents were once again divided into two distinct groups. Some did not feel significantly affected by the attacks against them, while others reported significant consequences.

"I haven't encountered instances that were too malicious or frequent. So far, they haven't affected my mental health or my duties as a journalist," comments one respondent. In contrast, another claims, "I am quite experienced, so I don't take such instances personally, but they have managed to affect my career. They harmed my reputation as an expert in the eyes of my colleagues." An intriguing observation is that even indirect involvement can lead to demotivation: "I have limited personal experience with hate speech as a journalist. I encounter it more when I share opinions on social media, and overall, the online platform environment has had a silencing effect on me. I felt demotivated to voice my opinion on any matter whatsoever."

Respondents who experienced attacks and felt seriously affected mentioned serious demotivation, self-censorship, and professional discreditation as the main consequences. "It made me question the purpose of my job. I was confused and frightened, and all these accusations against me led to self-censorship," says one respondent, while another mentions that "for more than a decade now, when asked what I do for a living, I have been hesitant to reply that I'm a journalist."

Public statements seem to be the prevailing way of publishers and professional associations to support journalists who have encountered hate speech instances. Two respondents mentioned that no steps were undertaken, while one respondent tried to handle the situation on his own by publishing a story to share his experience and by notifying the European Federation of Journalists, without managing to receive any concrete support though. The rest of the respondents shared the experience of public statements released by the media outlets they were working for and/or professional associations they were affiliated to. One respondent mentions that his employer offers *“trainings for the development of professional and ethical qualities, promotion of the norms of socially responsible journalism, and safety training, Moreover they alert the Media Freedom Rapid Response mechanism, and they send letters to media, politicians, and institutions in defense of journalists.”*

Regarding the possible measures taken by employers, organizations or the society in all, to counter hate speech against journalists effectively, a diverse set of findings emerged. Some respondents described solutions stemming from the legislation or the market disposition, others suggested that journalists should also make amends, uphold higher professional standards, and be more in touch with the people. In a particularly interesting remark one respondent suggests that *“there is hate speech against our media in general, not against specific journalists”*, while another stresses the importance of involving media owners and managers in all efforts to face this challenge: *“Often, there is a lack of respect [from employers, managers], and attempts to downplay the situation.”*

Support from fellow journalists, in formal ways or informally, is very important according to two of the respondents, while four mentioned that sharing personal experiences and letting the others know they are not alone in this is a strong supporting practice. Upholding the professional and ethical standards against political or financial agendas is once again mentioned as measure to be collectively enforced by the journalists community, including Unions and professional associations: *“They must enforce the norms strictly in order for them to expose the aggression and hatred against journalists.”*

However, only one of the respondents had the opportunity to receive training on how to deal with cases of harassment and/or intimidation, which proved to be meaningful and helpful.

All respondents believe that hate speech against journalists is on the rise, becoming an increasing trend that is exacerbated or growing more aggressive. One respondent attributed this trend to the polarization of opinions stemming from the war in Ukraine, another explained the increase in hate speech as influenced by political trends and party politics, and a third considered social media as a potential contributing factor.

KOSOVO

INTRODUCTION

This study is part of a larger regional project to combat Hate Speech Against Journalists in Southeast Europe, which was funded by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation and scientifically supervised by the Peace Journalism Laboratory at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

The overarching goal of this study was to thoroughly examine incidents of Hate Speech Against Journalists inside Kosovo. In recent years, the growing occurrences of hate speech aimed toward journalists has emerged as a major source of worry within the global media landscape and throughout democratic nations. The impact of hate speech toward journalists in Southeast European nations is particularly concerning, where weak democracies confront a rising danger to the core values of freedom of expression, press freedom, and democracy. Kosovo in particular has seen an increase in these types of verbal attacks on journalists, emphasizing the importance of tackling this issue.

The respective research partners in this study agreed on the definition of the term “Hate Speech Against Journalists”¹⁰. In our contemporary societies a critical examination of the concept of "hate speech" has led to the creation of two new terms: "hate discourse" and "hate speech act," both of which are based on "speech act theory" (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). In this report, we first provide a brief media landscape and legislation; secondly, we explain the methodology, before presenting our findings which include both quantitative and qualitative analyses of our data. Lastly, we offer suggestions for combating hate speech.

MEDIA LANDSCAPE AND LEGISLATION

Several factors impacted the media landscape in Kosovo during the period of the last three decades including the legacy of socialism, the collapse of Yugoslavia, the violent wars in the region, and the international involvement that followed. The media in Kosovo experienced several obstacles, including institutional discontinuity, political influence, inadequate law enforcement, and a weak civil society. However, the media was also crucial in promoting democracy, human rights, and social justice, as well as in developing a new media structure based on Western journalistic principles. The media landscape in Kosovo is diverse, with a mix of public service and commercial media outlets, some of which are committed to promoting and defending their economic interests (Shahini-Hoxhaj, 2021).

¹⁰"Hate speech against journalists refers to any form of communication, expression, or behavior that targets journalists specifically due to their profession, with the intention of inciting, promoting, or justifying hatred, discrimination, or harm towards them. This can include verbal, written, or online attacks, threats, intimidation, or harassment aimed at undermining the work, credibility, or personal safety of journalists. Hate speech against journalists often involves derogatory language, false accusations, personal attacks, and attempts to intimidate or silence journalists in their pursuit of truth, freedom of expression, and the dissemination of information to the public. It poses a significant threat to press freedom, democratic principles, and the ability of journalists to carry out their vital role in society."

Other obstacles journalists in Kosovo confront include historical deficiencies in journalism education, severe rivalry among media outlets, and widespread pressure to supply incomplete media coverage. Despite these hurdles, significant media outlets in Kosovo preserve journalistic standards, striving for neutrality by analyzing all aspects of a subject or event.

One of the most important laws regulating the rights of journalists to protect their sources of information is the Law on the Protection of Journalism Sources No.DL-44-2013. It guarantees source secrecy and protects journalists from court-ordered disclosure. Concerning hate speech directed at journalists, incidents often include pressure to violate professional norms protected by this law. When journalists refuse, they may face threats or physical violence. As such, laws similar to those that protect journalists' sources emphasize the importance of developing a legislative framework that protects journalists from hate speech and violence.

In official forums, the rise in hate speech has been duly noted as an issue of grave concern by the Association of Journalists of Kosovo, a non-governmental organization which serves as an umbrella for promoting, encouraging and improving quality journalism. Beyond simply condemning hate speech, the Association also collected data documenting incidents of hate speech and violence toward journalists during the political crises in the north of Kosovo. The Association's analysis of data collected indicated that there were a total of 27 attacks on journalists and media teams during these crises. This high number of physical attacks against journalists and the media takes on disturbing proportions due to the fact that the registered cases belong only to four small municipalities in the north of the country and that mainly journalists and media workers in the Albanian language were targets of these attacks¹¹.

¹¹ Available: <https://agk-ks.org/rastet-kerko/?keywords=&city=Zubin+Potok&ngakush=&gjinia=&year=&llojiimedias=&llojiincidentit=Sulme+ndaj+medieve+dhe+organizatave+mediale&ppublik=&gjyqesor=&pligjor=&search=1> (last seen 14.11.23)

METHODOLOGY

This report's methodology incorporates both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Initially a quantitative survey was conducted to explore the prevalence, nature, and repercussions of hate speech aimed toward journalists. The data was extracted through a questionnaire distributed online, with *snowball sampling*, where the journalist who accepted the request to complete the questionnaire distributed it to at least three other journalists. The data collected by the questionnaires through google forms summarizes the inputs of 107 journalists from Kosovo, of which 54.2 percent were females and 45.8 percent were men. The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions, including questions to acknowledge informed consent and to gather demographic data. The research questions were multiple choice with the option of elaborating through a longer answer.

In terms of qualitative research, we used focus groups to elicit significant insights from journalists who have been victims of hate speech or violent occurrences. The talks are intended to provide a more in-depth overview of the present situation as well as opinions on potential solutions and best practices for dealing with this prevalent issue. The focus group¹² with journalists from Kosovo was conducted on July 3, 2023 at the Faculty of Philology. In this focus group, nine journalists—five female and four male—participated, representing a cross-section of ethnic groups—nine ethnic Albanians and members of the RAE¹³ community. We do not disclose their identities to maintain confidentiality. Journalists in the group ran the gamut from those with twenty years of experience to those who had recently started in the field.

¹² The focus group was organized and its results were processed by four faculty members, Remzie Shahini-Hoxhaj, Muhamet Jahiri, Alban Zeneli and Jeta Abazi - Gashi.

¹³ The Acronym RAE stands for Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians.

ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

In order for hate speech to be addressed among a wider range of journalists in Kosovo, a survey was carried out. This questionnaire was answered by 107 journalists from different media. The analysis of responses to this survey indicate hate speech has been experienced by journalists regardless of age, gender, work experience or other professional factors. According to demographic collected, 37 percent of respondents indicated they had one to three years of journalistic experience; 19 percent had four to seven years of experience; and 44 percent indicated eight or more years of experience. When asked if they personally experienced or witnessed this language, 91 percent of them answered yes. While only 9 percent of them said that they have not experienced or witnessed hate speech against journalists.

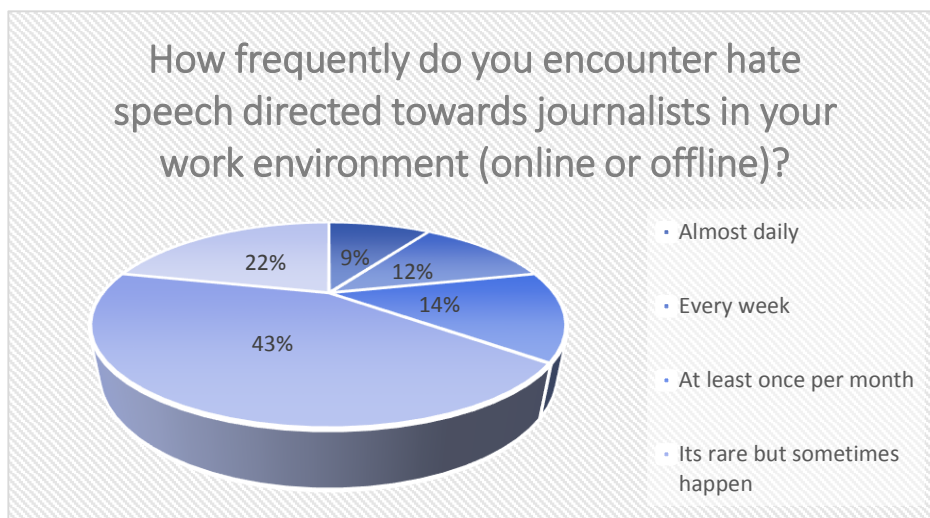


Figure 1. Responses of respondents if they encounter hate speech in the workplace

Regarding the frequency of using hate speech against journalists in the workplace, 9 percent of the respondents state that they faced such language every day, 12 percent once a week, 14 percent once a month and 43 percent of them say that although it happens it is rare, while 22 percent say that such a thing never happens. Considering the fact that a number of media workers

have not worked in the field, such a response is understandable. However, most of the respondents say that such language is common even in the work environment, which for journalists are mainly public environments - outside the offices of the mediums where they work. Addressing more deeply the issue of the use of hate speech with the respondents-journalists of this research, it turns out that the majority or 50 percent of hate speech by type belongs to online harassing language, then verbal abuse with 31 percent, 12 percent physical threats and seven percent other types and harassment. The fact that half the attacks journalists experience are internet-based it likely due to the high penetration of internet services in Kosovo. According to the Statistics Agency of Kosovo, 93 percent of citizens have access to broadband Internet, but its use is not associated with the teaching of Media Literacy skills in the public education system.

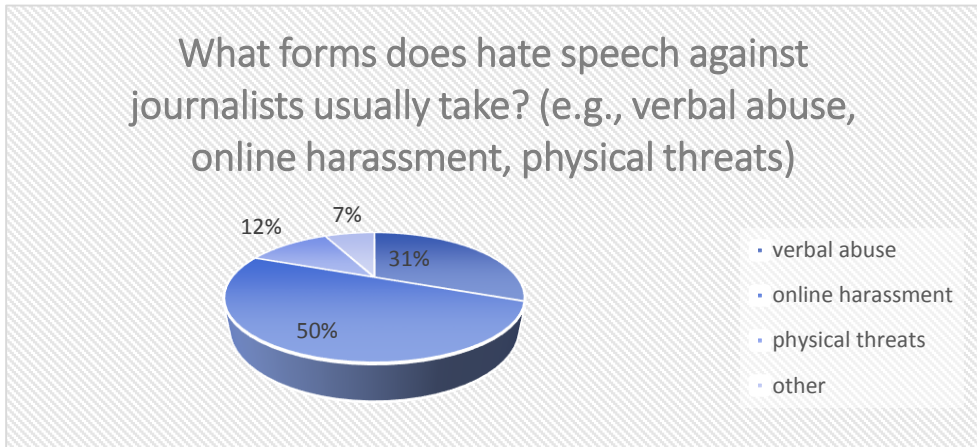


Figure 2. Answers of journalists surveyed about forms of hate speech.

Beyond the prevalence and forms of hate speech evidenced above, 36 percent of the journalists who participated in this research say that they have not received any kind of help from the editorial office or professional associations after being exposed to hate speech. By digging deeper into this issue, journalists were also asked about the motives or reasons for such language that targets them. According to the respondents, most of the attackers or 46 percent suspect that the journalists are serving the agenda of a third party, 39 percent say that the reason is the misunderstanding of the role and

responsibilities of journalists, 8 percent noted other reasons, while 5 percent say that the reasons for hate speech are the failures of journalists to meet their professional ethical standards. Only 2 percent of respondents believe that hate speech comes as a result of reproducing politicians' statements and those of leaders of public opinion.

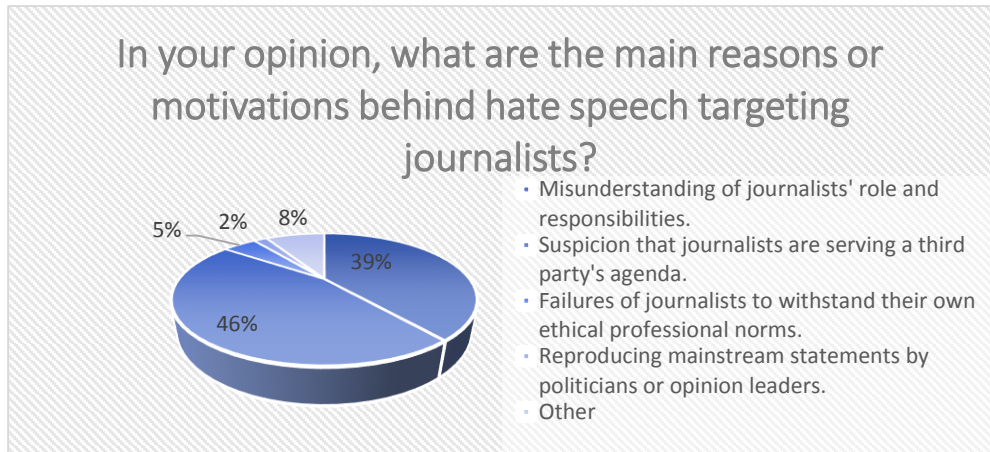


Figure 3. Answers of surveyed journalists regarding the motives or reasons for hate speech.

The data of this research show that the majority of journalists surveyed (58 percent) have noticed a change in the level and nature of hate speech, indicating incidents have increased and become harsher and more menacing. In the following section we present the results from the focus group with journalists of Kosovo. All of them explained that, following the war in Kosovo from 1999 to 2007, hate speech took many different forms. Hate mail was received in the newsroom in the form of actual letters written by unknown people and sealed in envelopes. This was not so much hate speech as it was a menacing attitude towards the media and journalists¹⁴. According to our informants, there are two main forms of hate speech, used in Kosovo:

¹⁴ Focus group, a male journalist from Prishtina.

Indirect forms are occurring more, and that also explains the difficulties of illustrating the hate speech in the case of Kosovo. There are several forms that spread hate speech, as indicated by the journalists in Kosovo. Namely, spreading the narratives that journalists report only negatively and hide the positive stories (a), questioning their professionalism and delegitimizing their role (b), preventing them from using public services (c), threatening to cut funds (d), source intimidation (e), and lastly, some sort of 'sexual exchange' for women journalists.

Direct hate speech is easier to demonstrate, and journalists would point to extreme political groups and groups that are presented as religious extremists (regardless of religion). Another illustration of the direct hate speech mentioned by some of the journalists is the phrase '*joint criminal enterprise*' which has been interpreted by these journalist as offending. To them, such a phrase is a public insult and lynching. It has been used by the husband of the current Kosovo's President, Prindon Sadriu (09.02.2023) in his private account, a phrase that later on he withdrawn. A special concern to this type of hate speech are discourses like '*Russian puppet*' and '*Serbian puppet*'. Such discourses not only put journalists on the enemy side but also jeopardize their credibility. This reference is specifically related to gender discrimination and it was raised by a male journalist, although the majority of participants would rather not link hate speech and this issue together. This discrimination also questions the morality of female journalists.

CONCLUSION

This report provides a statewide assessment on hate speech against journalist in Kosovo. Through this research we have also examine the role of social media, the legal framework, and societal attitudes in exacerbating or mitigating hate speech against journalists in respective countries. Journalists believe that hate speech is easily spread via social media, due to the fact that they are much more accessible and cheaper than other media.

This report has been conducted within a short timeframe, so the findings and recommendations should be interpreted within the context of those limitations. The journalists who participated in the research for this report did, however, mention positive solidarity as a tool to combat hate speech and the following are the main suggestions based our the findings:

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Support more training for journalists about hate speech and how to react when physically attacked or during crises.
2. Foster a culture of respect and appreciation for the vital role that journalists play in our societies through judicial monitoring of hate speech against journalist spread on online platforms.
3. Engage institutions and civil society organizations in condemning hate speech toward journalists and pledging to monitor their own internal and external communications for potential hate speech. Hate speech can lead to self-censorship, create a hostile work environment, and even result in physical harm to journalists, hence institutions and civil society should react on cases of hate speech against journalist without selective approach
4. Advocate for government action when journalist are attacked and train ministers and spokespeople on how to handle journalists professionally.
5. Require instruction in media literacy in school curricula to encourage critical consumption of public messages and close the knowledge gap concerning the role and function of media in society.

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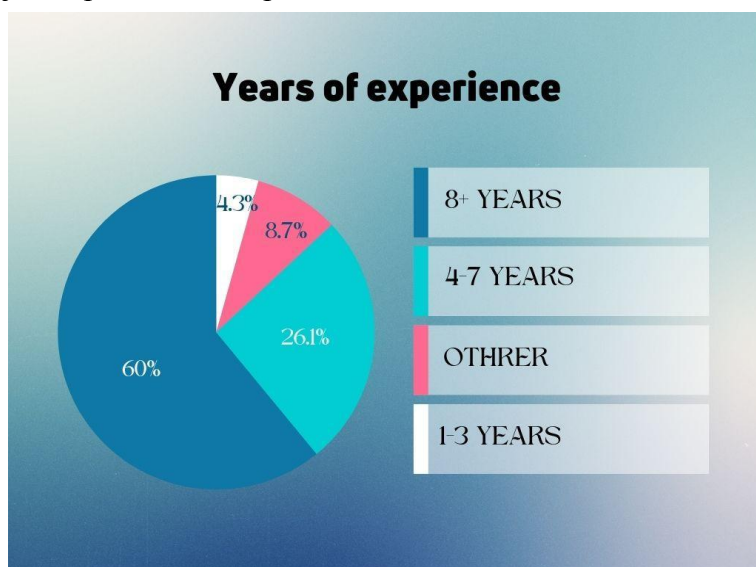
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REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

JOURNALISTS SURVEY

Twenty-three journalists, all employed by North Macedonian media outlets, responded to the questionnaire.

Sixty-nine percent of the responses come from journalists with **eight years or more of professional experience**. 4.3% of respondents have one to three years of job experience, compared to 26.1% who have four to seven years.

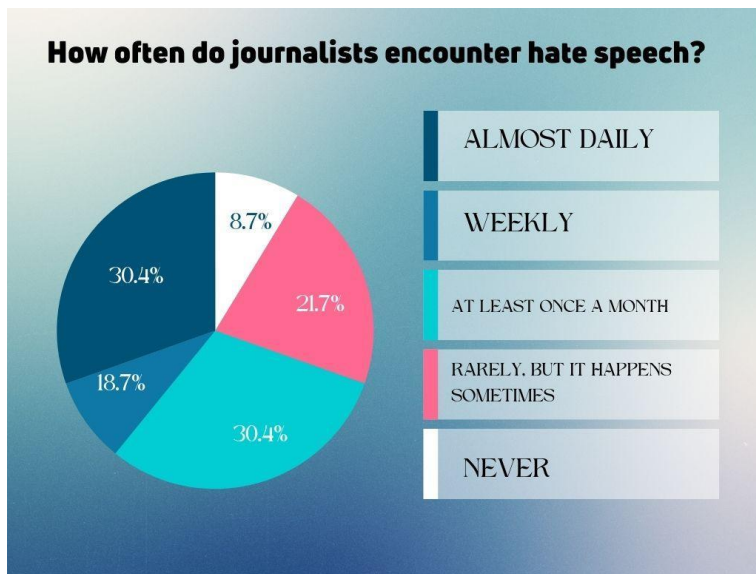


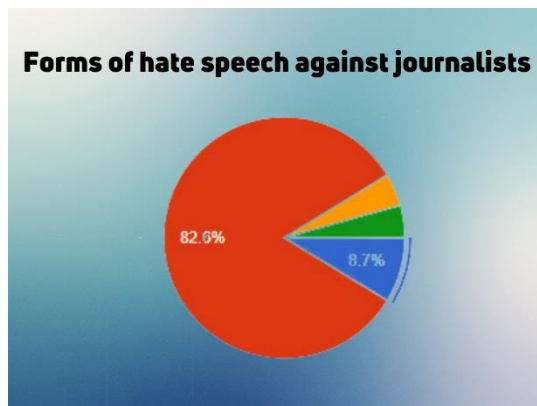
The majority of them stated in their responses that they have encountered hate speech at work.

One response is as follows:

"There have been multiple instances of party supporters calling their colleagues "traitors" and similar epithets at protests and party rallies because the media publishes pieces critical of their party. The same process occurs on social media platforms, but in addition to party bots, other intriguing groups—like anti-vaxxers, for instance—also become part of the circle."

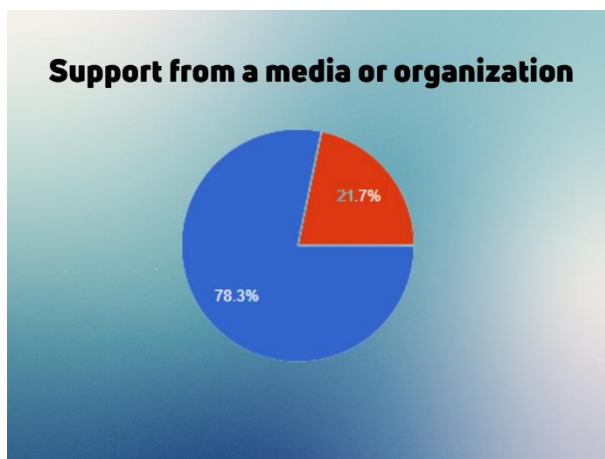
Respondents reported seeing **hate speech practically every day (30.4%)**, weekly (8.7%), monthly (30.4%), infrequently (21.7%), and never (8.7%).





Eighty-seven percent of journalists report verbal abuse, forty-three percent report physical threats, and eighty-six percent report experiencing internet harassment.

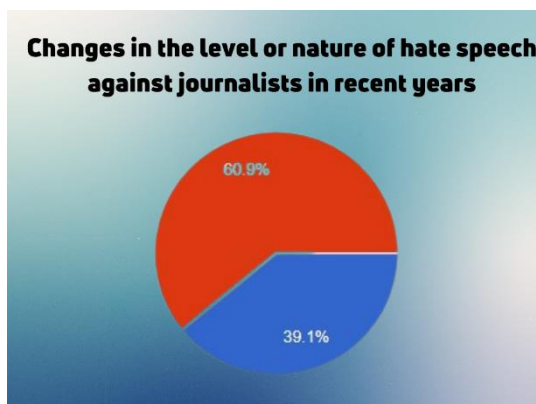
"The forms are present verbally, online, and in terms of physical threats," was one of the questioned responses. *"For me, the most recent instance involved the demonstrations calling for a "common Macedonia," which culminated in the assembly being stormed on April 27, 2017. People from NN threatened me physically because I completed a survey"*.



In the event of an attack or hate speech, the majority of journalists (**78.3%**) **got assistance from the media where they work or from an organization;** 21.7% did not receive support.



A total of **56.5% of journalists in Macedonia participated in a workshop or training program** designed to address hate speech and online abuse. On the other hand, 43.5% have not participated in any training on this subject.



Regretfully, **30.1% of North Macedonian journalists perceive some changes in hate speech,** while 60.9% do not detect any changes at all.

One of the suggestions from the surveyed journalists for the future reads as follows:

The following is one of the recommendations made by the polled journalists for the future: *"I would like the Prosecutor's Office to wake up from the deep sleep it has been in for years, and see what is happening through social networks - which are the main sources, where hate speech spreads, including for journalists." Lastly, in order to ensure that journalists feel secure in their writing and speaking, the state should take swift and decisive action against hate speech."*

As part of the "Hate speech against journalists" project, a focus group discussion with Macedonian journalists was held on November 14, 2023. The focus group consisted of five professional journalists (four female and one male), who shared their encounter with hate speech while on the job.

The following questions were posed to the focus group:

- 1. Have you personally experienced or witnessed hate speech targeting journalists in your professional career?*
- 2. How frequently do you encounter hate speech directed at journalists in your workplace, and in what form?*
- 3. What are the primary reasons or motivations for hate speech directed at journalists?*
- 4. Are there any steps being taken to combat hate speech directed at journalists? North Macedonia, like many other countries, confronts difficulties in fostering an environment in which journalists can operate without fear of retaliation, while still guaranteeing that the public has access to diverse and balanced information.*

Efforts to protect and improve media freedom of speech are critical not just for the health of journalism but also for the health of democracies, as an educated populace is dependent on a free and dynamic media landscape.

Through the discussion, Macedonian journalists highlighted a number of difficulties they encountered.

INTIMIDATION

Threats of physical assault and harassment, both online and offline, have been used to discourage investigative journalism.

POLITICALLY MOTIVATED ATTACKS

Media professionals in North Macedonia who cover politically sensitive issues face hate speech and threats. This includes verbal harassment, online abuse and even physical assaults, especially during election times or when allegations of corruption are reported. Journalists who criticize the government or powerful entities in North Macedonia may face such threats.

ONLINE BULLING

Hate speech directed towards journalists can occasionally be disseminated via social media sites. Media professionals in North Macedonia have reported instances of persistent online harassment, that not only have a negative impact on their mental health but also stifle free speech. (Ex. Furkan Saliu, TV Klan: The explicit death threat addressed to the journalist on the Twitter social network, Skopje 08.07.2022: The journalist was attacked by a Twitter account named "@narco_girl".)

DEFAMATION LAWS AND LEGAL CHALLENGES

Some media professionals in North Macedonia may encounter legal issues as influential individuals or groups exploit defamation laws to suppress criticism. The most recent case involves the Investigative Reporting Lab (IRL). A civil court in Skopje, North Macedonia, ruled against IRL and its editor-in-chief, Saska Cvetkovska, in a defamation case brought by businessman Kocho Angjushev. The court ordered IRL and Cvetkovska to pay damages along with both sides' legal costs. IRL is registered as a civil society organization with a mission to produce media content about corruption, crime, the rule of law, and good governance, according to its statute. However, Judge Jovanka Spirovska Paneva stated in her ruling that Investigative Reporting Lab (IRL) was a "non-media" organization, and its staff were merely "members of a group" rather than journalists. The judge

recommended the Ministry of Justice to shut down IRL, arguing that it lacks the right to publish media content as a civil society organization.

In North Macedonia, digital newsrooms like Investigative Reporting Lab (IRL) are not licensed by the media regulator in the same way broadcasters are. However, this does not affect their members' status as journalists.

CYBER SECURITY THREATS

Media professionals have expressed vulnerability to online security risks, including hacking attempts and the dissemination of misinformation. These attacks may target journalists and the media with the intent of undermining their credibility, or they may be politically motivated.

PERPETRATORS' LIABILITY IS LIMITED

One issue in North Macedonia is the failure to hold individuals accountable for hate speech and threats against journalists. Inadequate investigations and prosecutions can contribute to an atmosphere of impunity.

CONCLUSION

Despite some improvements, there are still concerns regarding media freedom in North Macedonia, since governmental meddling and economic pressure undermine news outlets' independence. Journalists in North Macedonia are frequently subjected to intimidation and legal challenges, making it difficult for them to report honestly and critically on political developments.

The concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few individuals or entities in North Macedonia raises concerns about the public's access to a diverse range of views and opinions. Organizations and platforms operating online, traditionally considered safe havens for free expression, are increasingly subject to monitoring and censorship, restricting citizens' ability to access and share information. The use of defamation laws and other legal procedures to stifle journalists and media organizations, both globally and in North Macedonia, is a growing concern that limits the potential for investigative reporting. Ultimately, it is emphasized that all these efforts

would be in vain without a substantial restoration of trust in journalism. The journalists concluded that the seventh estate should maintain its strength.

SERBIA

As part of the “Hate speech against journalists” a qualitative survey and a focus group discussion were conducted in Serbia to explore encounters of Serbian journalists with hate speech and the context of such instances.

QUALITATIVE REPORT

110 journalists from around 50 media in Serbia took part in the research, answering to 18 questions. Around 70% of the respondents have more than 8 years of work experience.

Most of them (77%) have either personally experienced hate speech or witnessed it, once or multiple times. When asked to name the forms of hate speech they experienced, they described being attacked by politicians, people in the street, police, and receiving anonymous threats on social media, etc. Around 35% of the journalists say that they encounter hate speech at least once a month, a little less claim that such cases are occasional, and approximately 15% claim that they encounter hate speech every week or almost every day. Only 4% of the participants say that they have never encountered hate speech in their careers.

None of the participants experienced physical threats or violence. Verbal abuse and online harassment are equally mentioned (around 45%). Around 60% of journalists have received support from their media or journalists’

associations after experiencing hate speech (eg. supported by editor-in-chief, colleagues, lawyers, citizens, receiving legal support from the union, etc.), while around 40% claim they have never received any support.

When asked to name the reasons or motives of hate speech against journalists, the respondents listed the following: polarization of media and society, politics, propaganda, jealousy, power, ignorance, discrimination on the basis of nationality. According to the respondents, hate speech has negative impact on their mental and professional lives. However, some of the journalists responded that it worked as a kind of motivation for them to perform responsibly and encouraged them to endure fighting for truth. Participants also responded that the number of verbal assaults and threats have increased in recent years.

Journalists have to be protected, above all by regulating their rights, in order to be able to do their job decently.

QUANTITATIVE REPORT

A focus group discussion involving five Serbian journalists (comprising 4 males and 1 female) was convened on 11th November 2023.

Participants were invited to share their testimonies and perspectives on the following topics:

Have you encountered hate speech in your work due to your profession? If so, please describe the situation.

Is hate speech more prevalent on social networks or in the offline world?

Does hate speech impede journalists' work and lead to self-censorship?

What are the primary reasons for the manifestation of hate speech against journalists in Serbia?

All participants confirmed encountering hate speech in their work, providing examples from their journalistic practice. They unanimously reported a higher incidence of hate speech in the virtual world, specifically on social networks.

Responses to whether hate speech causes self-censorship varied within the focus group. Some members claimed it did not lead to self-censorship, while others asserted that it did. Those in the latter group explained that journalists unconsciously avoided "difficult" topics and refrained from asking the right questions.

The majority of focus group participants identified several main reasons for hate speech: an unfavorable political situation, intolerance from authorities, widespread societal violence, and a low level of media literacy among the public, among other factors.

CONCLUSION & POLICY RECOMENDATION

Trust in media has been deteriorating the last decay. Amidst this development a very important issue has remained largely overlooked: the rampant propagation of hate speech targeting journalists. Across social media platforms and public discourse, Journalists and Media professionals face a rampant of threats, insults, and smear campaigns, often endorsed or instigated by influential figures, including politicians. This wave of hostility poses a severe threat to media freedom, creating an environment where self-censorship among journalists becomes a distressing reality, ultimately impeding the public's access to vital information. As it results from various researchers the more frequently journalists are targeted by hate speech the more they experience negative emotional and cognitive reactions such as feeling threatened to be physically assaulted, feeling angry, and blaming their audience on the one hand (Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016)

To counter this pervasive threat, a major effort is required to reverse the declining trust in media and journalists. This necessitates access to comprehensive and reliable data that accurately reflects the multifaceted challenges obstructing journalistic endeavors and impeding media freedom. In response to these critical concerns, an important and very unique cross-border comparative research initiative has been undertaken across Greece, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and Serbia¹⁵. With the valuable support of Friedrich Naumann Stiftung Greece-Cyprus representation, this collaborative effort aims to uncover and comprehend the diverse challenges faced by journalists and media outlets in this region. By analyzing the unique socio-political contexts of each country, this initiative lay the groundwork for informed strategies that can effectively safeguard and fortify media freedom. Through a rigorous use of qualitative and quantitative data we aimed to critically examine a major topic that undermines free speech, journalistic

¹⁵ The research was an idea and proposal from Peace Journalism Lab, School of Journalism and Mass Media Communications, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (leading partner), School of Journalism, University of Pristina Kosovo, School of Journalism Novi-Sad, Serbia, Blink 42-21 North Macedonia, Blue Link Bulgaria

work and most importantly the public sphere. The cross-regional report on hate speech against journalists in Greece, Serbia, Kosovo, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia is crucial for several reasons:

1. **Identifying Trends:** It helps identify common patterns and trends in hate speech across multiple countries in the region. This broader perspective allows for a better understanding of the issue beyond individual countries' contexts.
2. **Comprehensive Understanding:** It offers a comprehensive understanding of the challenges journalists face in the region. Hate speech against journalists isn't limited by national borders, and a cross-regional report helps capture its multifaceted nature.
3. **Policy Implications:** The report can influence policy-making and advocacy efforts on a regional or international level. It provides evidence-based data that can be used to push for legislative changes and better protection mechanisms for journalists.
4. **International Collaboration:** It fosters collaboration and cooperation among different countries and international organizations. Addressing hate speech against journalists often requires joint efforts and shared strategies, which a cross-regional report can facilitate.
5. **Impact Assessment:** It helps assess the impact of hate speech on journalism, press freedom, and ultimately, on democratic principles within these regions. Understanding the repercussions helps in devising more targeted solutions.
6. **Raising Awareness:** The findings the report can raise public and international awareness about the severity of hate speech against journalists. This awareness is crucial in garnering support for initiatives aimed at protecting press freedom.
7. **Guiding Interventions:** The report's findings and recommendations can serve as a guide for interventions, directing resources and efforts towards areas that need urgent attention, be it legal reforms, capacity building, or public awareness campaigns.

In essence, a cross-regional report on hate speech against journalists serves as a vital tool to comprehensively assess the issue, advocate for change, and foster collaboration to protect the essential role journalists play in upholding

democratic values. To that end and considering the relevant finding we propose the **following policy recommendations**:

1. **Patterns of Hate Speech:** The report have identified recurring themes or narratives used in hate speech against journalists across these regions. These could include political biases, ethnic or religious tensions, or targeting specific reporting topics especially those related with political issues, fake news or investigative journalism. These findings suggest that to address the issue an initiative that will move beyond the region is important.
2. **Legislative and Institutional Gaps:** It highlights deficiencies in legal frameworks or institutional mechanisms meant to protect journalists from hate speech. Especially now and following the recent adoption of EU initiative regarding the European Media Freedom Act it is important to include and further this initiative with inadequate laws, provisions and support structures that will address this important issue.
3. **Impact on Freedom of Press:** The report sheds light on how hate speech affects the freedom of media in the region. Intimidation, threats, or violence against journalists might impede their ability to report objectively and fearlessly.
4. **Social and Political Context:** Understanding the socio-political landscape is crucial. The report detail how hate speech against journalists is influenced by broader social divisions, political polarization, or historical tensions in each region.
5. **Journalists' Safety and Well-being:** Assessing the safety measures and support systems available for journalists facing hate speech is essential. It highlights the need for better protection, psychological support, cybersecurity and training programs.
6. **Media Literacy and Public Perception:** Examining the role of media literacy and public perception towards journalists is vital. Misinformation and negative perceptions could contribute to the prevalence of hate speech. To this end media literacy initiatives will support crucially the role of media through promoting a vital understating of their crucial role in sustaining democracy.

Recommendations stemming from these findings include:

1. **Legal Reforms:** Advocating for or strengthening laws that protect journalists from hate speech and ensuring their proper enforcement.
2. **Capacity Building:** Providing training programs for journalists on safety measures, and dealing with hate speech. These training programs should be developed in collaboration with Journalistic Unions and Universities
3. **Support Networks:** Establishing support networks or hotlines for journalists facing threats or harassment.
4. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Implementing campaigns to promote media literacy and foster a more positive perception of journalists' roles in society.
5. **International Collaboration:** Encouraging cross-border cooperation among media organisations, Journalistic Unions, Universities and international organizations to address hate speech against journalists collectively.
6. **Community Engagement:** Engaging communities in dialogues to address underlying social tensions contributing to hate speech.

Peace Journalism Lab, Aristotle University initiative, forged through a strong partnership with Blink 42-21, Blue Link, the University of Novisad, the University of Prishtina, and with the invaluable support of the Friedrich Nauman Foundation, represents a significant stride towards shedding light on an issue that has been largely overlooked in public discourse. This collaborative effort brings together diverse perspectives and expertise from various institutions, laying a foundation for a comprehensive exploration of an issue that demands attention. By joining forces, our organizations contributed their insights and resources to propel the discourse on an often-neglected subject. In addition to the research aspect, this initiative aims to be a catalyst for awareness, education, and advocacy. Through the collaborative efforts of the involved entities, the initiative seeks not only to highlight the issue but also to foster a collective understanding of its nuances and implications. The partnership ensures a holistic approach, drawing on the strengths of each entity involved.

Furthermore, the initiative is positioned as an important advocate for positive change. By addressing an issue we aim to prompt societal conversations,

influence policy considerations, and tangible solutions. We hope that it will pave the way for a more informed and engaged society.

ANNEX “A”: QUESTIONARY

- 1. Personal Information: a. Name: b. Publication/Organization: c. Years of experience as a journalist:*
- 2. Have you personally experienced or witnessed hate speech targeting journalists in your professional career? If yes, please provide a brief description of the incident(s).*
- 3. How frequently do you encounter hate speech directed towards journalists in your work environment (online or offline)?*
- 4. What forms does hate speech against journalists usually take? (e.g., verbal abuse, online harassment, physical threats)*
- 5. In your opinion, what are the main reasons or motivations behind hate speech targeting journalists?*
- 6. How does hate speech affect you personally and professionally? What impact does it have on your mental well-being and job performance?*
- 7. What steps, if any, does your publication/organization take to address and mitigate hate speech directed at journalists?*
- 8. Are there any specific measures you would like to see implemented by your publication/organization, as well as society as a whole, to tackle hate speech against journalists effectively?*
- 9. Have you received any support from your publication/organization or professional associations when dealing with hate speech incidents? If yes, please describe the support you received.*
- 10. Are you aware of any legal or policy frameworks in your country that address hate speech against journalists? If yes, please provide details.*
- 11. What measures, in your opinion, should be taken at the governmental level to combat hate speech targeting journalists?*

12. Have you participated in any training or workshops aimed at dealing with hate speech or online harassment? If yes, what was your experience, and did it help you cope with such incidents better?

13. How can journalists support each other in combating hate speech? Are there any specific initiatives or networks that you find valuable in this regard?

14. Have you noticed any changes in the level or nature of hate speech against journalists over recent years? If yes, please elaborate.

15. Is there anything else you would like to share or suggest regarding the issue of hate speech against journalists?

Thank you for your participation! Your insights are valuable in understanding and addressing the challenges faced by journalists dealing with hate speech.

Partners Profile

Peace Journalism Lab, School of Journalism and Mass Communications Aristotle University of Thessaloniki: The Lab is a center of excellence in its field and within the Greek academic community, focusing on interdisciplinary themes such as: International and European Journalism, Peace Journalism, Crisis Management, Hate speech, disinformation, verification and awareness on the fake news, Media and war, Strategic Communications, Media and News Literacy, Diversity and the Media. The Labs' overall objective is to promote and to spread awareness to young people on the globalized information and communication society by facilitating research activities and by disseminating new research insights within this field.

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom has campaigned for the values of freedom, responsibility, the rule of law, and human rights throughout Germany and the world since it was set up on 19 May 1958 by Theodor Heuss, the president of Germany. As a foundation for freedom, it is a thematic innovation driver and freedom platform for all liberals in Germany. It campaigns for allowing as many people to have as many opportunities as possible – and promotes a tolerant, progressive, well-educated and performance-based society. Its priority topics include education, an open and digital society, the future of the social market economy, and international politics. The Foundation's headquarters are in Potsdam and Berlin with offices throughout Germany and in 60 countries across the world. The office of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom - Greece and Cyprus has been present in Athens since 2012. Its mission is to promote freedom, human rights, pluralist democracy, free market economy and the rule of law in Greece and Cyprus, while supporting events, publications, educational and innovative projects in collaboration with local civil society partners.

www.freiheit.org/greece-and-cyprus

The **University of Novi Sad**, with over 50,000 students and around 5,000 employees, is the second largest in the Republic of Serbia and one of the largest scientific and educational centers in Central Europe. The university community consists of 14 faculties located in 4 cities of the Autonomous

Province of Vojvodina, in the northern part of the country, and is one of 6 state universities in Serbia. The oldest Faculty of the University is the Faculty of Philosophy, founded in 1954. It is one of the largest faculties in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, within which about 5,500 students obtain higher education in social and humanities in 19 departments. The Faculty also has the Department of Media Studies, which has study programs for basic and master's academic studies in journalism and communication and public relations. The Department has many years of cooperation with related departments of universities in Belgrade and Nis (Serbia), Zagreb (Croatia), Kortrijk (Belgium), Ljubljana (Slovenia), Podgorica (Montenegro), Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Szeged (Hungary), Skopje (North Macedonia), Thessaloniki (Greece) and Timișoara (Romania). The specificity of the Department is the International festival of short radio and television forms of journalism students 'On the Record', which has been held since 2012. The goal of this festival is to promote the improvement of quality practical work with students at journalism faculties, the exchange of experiences and the development of intercultural dialogue in the countries of the region.

The **University of Prishtina “Hasan Prishtina”**, founded in 1969, is the largest and oldest public university in Kosovo. It has played a crucial role in the advancement of higher education and research in the region. From 1989 to 1999, all education in Kosovo was under violent measures. The University was a major target for persecution, resulting in the expulsion of Albanian academics and students from the academic milieu. In response, they established a clandestine parallel education system, operating discreetly in adapted facilities. Throughout this timeframe, students took on the role of organizers, leading numerous protests against the infringement of the right to education in their native language.

The **University of Prishtina** is committed to enhancing academic quality and student achievement. The institution has 14 faculties and offers a wide range of programs, which encompass social sciences, humanities, natural sciences, and engineering. It is the highest-ranked higher education institution in the country (1) and one of the top-ranking institutions in the region (5) according to webometrics. Aside from academic and research interests, the institution nurtures a dynamic student life, which offers over 30,000 Kosovan and international students the opportunity to participate in

extracurricular activities, clubs, and groups that not only broaden their experience but also help them develop critical qualities, such as leadership and cooperation. The University of Pristina is committed to providing students with a high-quality education that will prepare them for their future careers and increase their employability. The university has developed over 100 inter-institutional partnerships through the Erasmus+ program and maintains more than 160 bilateral collaborations with local, regional, and global institutions

The Center for Social Innovations BLINK 42-21 [BLINK] is a platform that connects people dedicated to the idea that social innovation could lead to economic, educational and social transformation through smarter use of people, data and technology. BLINK is established in 2011 in Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia and today acts as a Social Tech organisation with a team of young, motivated and dedicated people who design and scale innovative solutions for identified social challenges in the country, the Balkan region and in many European countries. BLINK has a significant track record in implementing innovative projects that provide digital solutions for improvements in the public sector, innovations for better education and great immersive cultural experiences. Although a small team, gathers experience professionals with diverse educational and professional background, and skills. Joining the capacities of experienced project managers, ICT specialists, creative and media practitioners, the team has proven capacity in designing and implementing short and long term projects funded by different donor programs, like Creative Europe, Erasmus +, USAID, UNICEF, WFD, IRI, ILO, national public funds etc.

BlueLink is an established provider of e-networking, technical support, capacity building, and applied policy/social research to civil society groups and organisations in Bulgaria and across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) who share pro-European values. BlueLink is registered in Bulgaria as a foundation in public interest, with the mission to **to** uphold civil society, democracy, shared European values and environmental sustainability by digital networking and free exchange of information. Today BlueLink is a well established hub of coordination, exchange of information and information technology innovation among environmental civil society organisations (CSOs) and groups. International organisations, such as the Aarhus Convention Secretariat at UNECE and the Regional Environmental Center for CEE, state authorities, such as the Ministry of Environment and Waters and the Forestry Agency, municipalities and countless NGOs have partnered with BlueLink. BlueLink operates from Bulgaria across Central and Eastern Europe, the EU, South Eastern Europe, and globally as a member of the [Association for Progressive Communications](#). It is also a member of other coalitions, platforms and initiatives across Europe and Bulgaria.

In an ever-shifting landscape of media, the last decade has borne witness to a disconcerting decline in media freedom, marking a troubling trend that has intensified since 2012. During this period, there has been a notable erosion of environments conducive to a free press, accompanied by a surge in various targeted attacks on the media. Amidst this challenging environment, an issue of paramount significance that did not attract adequate attention is hate speech against journalists. Across social media platforms, within content endorsed or even disseminated by politicians, and within public comments, there has been a disturbing proliferation of threats, insults, and smear campaigns targeting those engaged in the journalistic field.

Responding to these critical concerns, a cross-border comparative research initiative has been launched across Greece, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and Serbia. This collaborative effort, generously supported by the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, seeks to uncover and comprehend the diverse challenges faced by journalists and media outlets in these regions. This initiative aims to lay the foundation for informed strategies that can effectively safeguard and fortify media freedom. Through a rigorous combination of qualitative and quantitative data analysis, the objective is to critically examine a major issue undermining free speech, journalistic work, and, most importantly, the public sphere. These attacks not only threaten the individuals involved but also jeopardize the much-needed public debates that strengthen our democracies and safeguard our fundamental rights. This initiative is a crucial step toward preserving the integrity of our media and, by extension, the health of our democratic societies.