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FREEDOM & RESISTANCE 2021

Democratic backsliding is occurring in the region alongside altered forms of attack on freedom of speech and shrinking space for dialogues and free exchange of ideas. This trend has been observed in several reports during 2021.

In an overview of the status for independent journalism in the region *Visegrad/Insights*¹ analyzes a number of reports related to this topic. A noteworthy finding in this overview is that the largest increase in numbers of journalists is found in the worst-performing countries in terms of media freedom. In other words, more stable working conditions for loyal journalists is more likely in less democratic media landscapes in the CEE region.²

Thus, the overall trend is an increasing number of journalists and shrinking space for media freedom,³ combined with altered risks to the journalistic profession, standards, and protection.⁴

This development indicates that regimes that wish to control the media not only try to silence independent media, but also intentionally use media to influence their citizens with filtered and “approved” information. Which further underlines the importance of reliable and independent media and a diverse media landscape with transparency of ownership.

ANOTHER RECENT threat to the freedom of speech is that several countries have tried to limit the impact of information on sensitive subjects, such as the pandemic or migration. *Reporters without Borders* reports on different strategies to control media in the region, subject-wise or generally. Hungary, Poland, Albania, and Montenegro are listed as countries that block journalism by directly regulating media in different ways. Police violence has been used against journalists in Serbia, Poland, and Bulgaria, according to



ILLUSTRATION: RAGNI SVENSSON

Reporters Without Borders that concludes: “the inability or reluctance of states to protect threatened journalists contributes to the perception of danger”.⁵

There is a close connection between attacks on freedom of speech and academic freedom. In their continuous

analysis, the *Varieties of Democracy* dataset (V-dem) suggest specific interrelation between media diversity and freedom of academic and cultural expression.⁶ Non-democratic leadership seems to be interested in controlling the full spectrum of expressive freedom in order to ensure

that criticism is suppressed.

That such constraints on academia occur in the region is also clear from a look at, for instance, the *Annual Report of the Network of Concerned Historians* (NCH) 2021,⁷ that contains news about the censorship of history and the persecution of historians, archivists, and archaeologists around the globe. NCH also notes the introduction of laws and regulations that impose a narrative of the past that plays into the hands of those in power. In Hungary, as an example, they note a shift of content in school textbooks that omit some parts of the past and glorify others. In the case of Belarus, the NCH report contains a long list of violations, detainments, abrupt dismissals, and threats towards students and scholars.

Scholars at Risk (SAR), in their 2021 report *Free to think*,⁸ also highlight the situation in Belarus as particularly alarming and note that “the government of Alexander Lukashenko replaced rectors and other administrative staff at higher education institutions based on political considerations and called on universities to expel students and faculty who participated in or supported the protests.”⁹

IN SUM, THERE ARE several recent reports highlighting a worrying trend towards what one could call attacks on democratic values such as independent media and academic freedom.

Still, one might add, there is also a lot

of resistance, not only from individual courageous journalists and academics, but also plenty of solidarity initiatives in the region between colleagues, organizations, and institutions. I could for instance name one such scholar: Professor Andrea Petö, CEU in Hungary, who recently resigned from the Hungarian Accreditation Committee’s humanities subcommittee after she was asked to recall the publication of a peer-reviewed article in an international scholarly journal, concerning the failure of European standards organizations to confront illiberalism in Hungary and Poland.¹⁰ The article was, however, published unchanged.¹¹ ✕

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references

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- 3 *Reporters Without Borders’ World Press Freedom Index rates 2013–2021*. See <https://rsf.org/en/2021-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-vaccine-against-disinformation-blocked-more-130-countries>
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