

Slovakia

SLAVOMÍR GÁLIK, JÁN VIŠŇOVSKÝ, BRANISLAV OPRALA & BIANKA FRANCISTYOVÁ

INTRODUCTION

Slovak society is currently highly polarized, and the reasons for this can be seen in the radical communication by key figures on the Slovak political scene on such significant topics as the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in 2018, the government's actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine. The culmination of this polarization was the attempted assassination of Prime Minister Robert Fico on 15 May 2024, which was an extreme manifestation of social disintegration and political radicalism.

Economically, Slovakia faces several systemic challenges. To reduce public debt, the government has adopted consolidation measures that have increased the tax burden in many areas. The Slovak economy is threatened by high energy prices as well as tariffs imposed by US President Donald Trump. The automotive industry is a driving force economically and contributes significantly to the country's GDP.

In 2018, both Slovakia and the world were shaken by the murder of investigative journalist J. Kuciak and his fiancée M. Kušnírová, sparking a wave of protests and discussions about the safety of journalists. It also led to a change in top political positions. Even though the perpetrator of the murder has been convicted, the trials of those who ordered the murder are still ongoing. Hate attacks against journalists have increased during the pandemic and the Russian Ukrainian conflict are present mainly in the online space and on social media.

Data collection for this study took place from September 2021 to April 2022. Declining trust in media institutions and the constant undermining of the objectivity of reporting and the balance of political debate have led to further political and social instability. During the data collection, there was an increase in hate speech against media workers, including from politicians.

BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

The sample of Slovak journalists has a slightly higher percentage of females in terms of gender (54%). On average, the journalists were 42.7 years old (SD = 11.3; Median = 41). They are generally well educated: 70.8% have a master's degree, 8.8% have a bachelor's degree, 7.6% have a doctorate, and 8.0% have completed high school. 64.3% have completed either formal education or professional training in journalism, of which 93.1% have earned a college degree in the field. When asked to indicate the type of formal professional training or education, most of the respondents had obtained a degree from a university (81.1%), but some had also professional experience (25.9%) or had taken a short-term course at a university (22.3%).

JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

Most journalists in Slovakia do not have managerial positions at work (58.2%). 20.8% of journalists have a middle management role and top managers represent 12.9% of all journalists. Up to 63.7% of journalists work in national media, 21.3% in regional media, 9.9% in local media and 5.0% in multinational media. Over half of all journalists in Slovakia work in private/commercial media (57.9%), while 32.2% work in public service media. Work in community media is at 4.4%, non-profit media 0.3% and others 3.5%, (of which 66.6% mentioned city-run media). Less than a third of journalists in Slovakia work in television (26.9%), followed by newspapers (26.0%), radio (17.8%), internet native (13.2%), news agency (7.9%), while work in a magazine was less represented (2.0%).

A close majority of journalists surveyed in Slovakia work under full-time permanent contracts – 51.5%, as freelancers or self-employed work 32.5%, in full-time fixed-term contracts it is 8.0%, and 3.8% mention other (with student temporary work agreements, contracting, or self-employment mentioned), part-time permanent contracts 2.6%, and part-time fixed-term contracts 1.8%. More than half (57.3%) of the journalists surveyed receive 100% of their income from journalism and 33.6% also have other sources of income. If journalists also have other means of employment, on average 74.7% of their salary comes from journalism, while 25.3% comes from other income.

On average, Slovak journalists had 13.6 years of professional experience (SD = 9.3; Median = 11). Most of them (87.4%) worked on a variety of beats or subject areas and 12.6% worked on a single one. Only a small proportion of journalists in Slovakia are members of trade unions or professional associations. According to the data, 12.2% of respondents reported membership of such organizations, 87.2% stated they were not members, and 1% did not know. This low unionization rate may reflect the traditionally weak role of collective representation in Slovak journalism.

The average working week of Slovak full-time journalists was 43.5 hours (SD = 14.5; Median = 40). Related to this, 63.7% of respondents reported feeling stressed at work often or very often in the previous six months, and 24.9% of respondents reported feeling sometimes stressed at work in the previous six months. Only 11.4% of respondents never or rarely felt this way.

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

Verbal attacks, such as hate speech or public discrediting of journalists' work, were among the occasional or rare security threats that Slovak journalists faced during the time of data collection (see Table 1). However, despite being encountered less frequently, experiences with more dangerous threats, such as legal action or physical threats, are worrying. These experiences also have an impact on the fears expressed by Slovak journalists; as many as two-thirds of journalists feared that those who harm journalists will go unpunished (see Table 2).

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	342	0.0%	0.0%	32.7%	40.1%	27.2%
Public discrediting of your work	342	0.0%	0.0%	22.8%	34.2%	43.0%
Surveillance	342	0.0%	0.0%	4.7%	11.7%	83.6%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	342	0.0%	0.0%	4.4%	9.1%	86.5%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	342	0.0%	0.0%	0.9%	1.2%	98.0%
Legal actions against you because of your work	342	0.0%	0.0%	4.7%	12.3%	83.0%
Stalking	342	0.0%	0.0%	3.2%	12.6%	84.2%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	342	0.0%	0.0%	12.9%	24.0%	63.2%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	342	0.0%	0.0%	1.8%	5.6%	92.7%
Other physical attacks	342	0.0%	0.0%	2.0%	3.5%	94.4%
Coercion	342	0.0%	0.0%	12.3%	26.6%	61.1%
Questioning of your personal morality	342	0.0%	0.0%	17.5%	32.7%	49.7%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	342	0.0%	0.0%	2.6%	5.3%	92.1%
Others disseminating your personal information	342	0.0%	0.0%	3.8%	11.7%	84.5%
Workplace bullying	342	0.0%	0.0%	6.4%	11.1%	82.5%
Abductions	342	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.3%	99.4%
Office raids or seizures or damage to equipment	342	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%	99.4%
Intimidation that targets family	342	0.0%	0.0%	3.5%	6.4%	90.1%

Question: "In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist?"

TABLE 2. WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Worried about losing job in journalism within the next 12 months	342	14.0%	2.3	1.11
Concerned about physical well-being	342	12.3%	2.1	1.08
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	342	13.7%	2.7	1.22
Concerned that those who harm journalists in [country] go unpunished	342	66.7%	3.7	1.13

Question: "Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ROLES

Slovak journalists expressed strong support for the traditional roles of journalism such as objective reporting, clarification of social issues, education of the audience, etc. This is proven by high statements on the importance of education of the audiences, shining a light on and pointing toward possible solutions to society's problems, as well as counteracting disinformation. On the other hand, they expressed less support for politically assertive roles and political agendas (see Table 3).

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	342	89.2%	4.38	0.82
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	342	55.6%	3.46	1.28
Shine a light on society's problems	342	75.7%	4.06	1.02
Motivate people to participate in politics	342	29.2%	2.75	1.20
Provide analysis of current affairs	342	60.8%	3.66	1.12
Let people express their views	342	45.3%	3.27	1.20
Provide information people need to form political opinion	342	51.5%	3.38	1.23
Advocate for social change	342	21.3%	2.54	1.16
Influence public opinion	342	26.0%	2.71	1.19
Set the political agenda	342	6.7%	1.95	1.00
Promote peace and tolerance	342	68.1%	3.83	1.15
Educate the audience	342	76.6%	4.06	0.96
Point toward possible solutions to society's problems	342	71.1%	3.90	1.03
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	342	48.0%	3.34	1.23
Support national development	342	46.8%	3.34	1.21
Support government policy	342	17.8%	2.38	1.19
Convey a positive image of political leaders	342	2.6%	1.33	0.74
Provide entertainment and relaxation	342	22.8%	2.48	1.29
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	342	44.7%	3.25	1.27
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	342	52.0%	3.42	1.21
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	342	27.2%	2.62	1.31
Support efforts to protect public health	342	65.8%	3.77	1.07
Counteract disinformation	342	71.3%	3.96	1.08
Discuss future implications of current events	342	59.9%	3.64	1.11

Question: "Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work." (Scale: 5 = Extremely important; 4 = Very important; 3 = Moderately important; 2 = Slightly important; 1 = Not at all important.)

JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

Most Slovak journalists think that facts are key and essential for objective reporting (they should be allowed to speak for themselves), but they also realize that interpreting them is just as important. It is equally important for Slovak journalists to point out false information (see Table 4).

TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	342	83.9%	4.20	0.83
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	342	14.3%	2.18	1.12
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	342	21.3%	2.44	1.13
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	342	54.7%	3.43	1.22
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	342	74.6%	3.87	0.93
Journalists should trust their instincts in deciding what's true and what's not	342	27.2%	2.78	1.10
Journalists should intuitively know what the final story will be	342	53.2%	3.33	1.03
Journalists should let the facts speak for themselves	342	95.3%	4.49	0.62
Journalists should be part of a community to portray it accurately	342	38.6%	3.24	0.91
Journalists should make their standpoint transparent in their work	342	84.2%	4.27	0.97
Journalists should alert audiences when a source's claim is untruthful	342	93.6%	4.59	0.66

Questions: "The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." / "Using the same scale, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following beliefs." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

Slovak journalists unanimously agreed that professional norms are more important for ethical reporting than subjective and situational considerations (see Table 5). However, when it came to the justification of controversial reporting methods, they admitted to these only in very rare cases (see Table 6).

TABLE 5. ETHICAL ORIENTATIONS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
What is ethical for journalists should always be determined by professional standards regardless of situation and personal judgment	342	84.8%	4.29	0.81
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	342	45.6%	3.16	1.14
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	342	20.2%	2.30	1.19
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	342	11.4%	1.90	1.09

Question: "The following statements describe different responses journalists may have to ethical problems. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

TABLE 6. JUSTIFICATION OF CONTROVERSIAL REPORTING METHODS

	N	Always justified	Justified on occasion
Claiming to be somebody else	342	1.2%	48.0%
Using hidden recording devices	342	0.9%	60.8%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	342	3.8%	48.5%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	342	0.3%	49.7%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	342	0.0%	21.3%
Paying people for confidential information	342	1.5%	26.6%
Accepting money from sources	342	2.6%	14.9%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	342	2.3%	21.1%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	342	0.9%	14.9%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	342	0.9%	21.9%

Question: "Which of the following, if any, do you think may be always justified, or justified on occasion, and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?"

EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

Slovak journalists said that they have a relatively high degree of freedom in their work. More than two-thirds claimed to have complete or great freedom in choosing their stories and deciding which aspects to emphasize in each story. Overall though, media freedom was rated lower by respondents (58.2%) (see Table 7).

TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	342	86.3%	4.12	0.70
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	342	85.7%	4.14	0.75
Media freedom in Slovakia	342	58.2%	3.61	0.81

(Scale: 5 = Complete freedom; 4 = A great deal of freedom; 3 = Some freedom; 2 = Little freedom; 1 = No freedom at all.)

EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

Slovak journalists considered journalistic ethics to be the most important in news production (78.6%). Similarly important were media laws, regulations, and editorial policy. However, journalists also cited time constraints as a relatively important factor in news production (61.2%) (see Table 8).

TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	327	38.2%	3.14	1.05
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	328	58.5%	3.55	0.92
The business managers of the news organization	243	8.5%	2.07	1.13
The owners of the news organization	240	14.6%	2.09	1.24
Editorial policy	324	60.0%	3.58	1.05
Advertising considerations	227	9.3%	1.90	1.14
Profit expectations	243	12.8%	2.28	1.15
Audience research and data	281	23.8%	2.67	1.14
Availability of news-gathering resources	316	55.1%	3.41	1.15
Time limits	325	61.2%	3.66	0.99
Journalism ethics	332	78.6%	4.16	0.94
Self-censorship	266	16.5%	2.32	1.17
Personal values and beliefs	295	27.8%	2.66	1.24
Colleagues in other media	319	12.9%	2.22	1.12
Friends, acquaintances and family	311	6.1%	1.95	0.97
Feedback from the audience	332	26.5%	2.83	1.10
Competing news organizations	315	12.7%	2.37	1.03
Media laws and regulation	311	35.0%	2.95	1.26
Access to information	327	60.9%	3.65	1.13
Government censorship	249	18.9%	1.94	1.46
Government officials	251	8.4%	1.75	1.08
Politicians	255	9.0%	1.79	1.08
Business people	243	4.9%	1.54	0.89
Public relations	280	20.7%	2.24	1.22
Relationships with news sources	295	34.2%	2.75	1.24
Police	242	5.4%	1.59	0.96
Issue advocacy groups	254	11.4%	2.00	1.10
Scientists or health experts	286	23.4%	2.49	1.29
Religious groups and institutions	218	6.0%	1.64	1.01
Military	195	3.6%	1.32	0.79
Para-military groups, militias and similar groups	183	0.5%	1.13	0.47
Organized crime and criminal groups	174	0.6%	1.09	0.42
Terrorist groups	174	0.6%	1.07	0.37

Question: "Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist." (Scale: 5 = Extremely influential; 4 = Very influential; 3 = Moderately influential; 2 = Slightly influential; 1 = Not at all influential)