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**Master's Thesis**

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**Eroded resilience of democracy:  
Attacks on journalists as part of a political agenda  
in Slovakia**

Master's Thesis

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Year of the defence: 2024

## **Declaration**

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on the 28th of July 2024

Karolína Farská

## References

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## **Abstract**

Attacks on journalists have become a more frequent phenomenon in Western democracies, and the strategies leading to these attacks, as well as their impacts on journalism and democracy in the free world, remain under-researched. This Master's thesis aims to fill this gap by focusing on attacks on journalists in Slovakia during the first eight months of the fourth government of Robert Fico, which have become part of the political agenda of government officials. The analysis is based on data from semi-structured interviews with 14 Slovak journalists from 8 different newsrooms, including four editors-in-chief of major national media outlets, Denník N, Denník SME, Aktuality.sk and Investigative center of Jan Kuciak. Using the grounded theory method, this thesis creates a contextualized scientific concept of the situation in Slovakia, explaining the methods and reasons behind the government's unusually strong and systematic attacks on journalists. These attacks include personal attacks, continuous hate campaigns against various media outlets and their employees, legislative changes, and portraying journalists as a security threat, thereby legitimizing their attacks on free and critical media.

An important role in this contextualized scientific concept is played by academic literature explaining democratic backsliding and informational autocracy, which are present in this case in Slovakia. The thesis also shows that systematic attacks on journalists seem to be a part of a broader political strategy aimed at weakening the control mechanisms and institutions of the democratic state, thereby contributing to the process of weakening democracy in the country by attacking one of its pillars - placing media under constant pressure from political power. The analysis shows that politicians securitize the issue - by using the rhetoric of fear and labeling independent critical media as enemies who need new regulations - to gain public support for their actions, while the real security threat to Slovak democracy seem to be precisely

these systematic attacks on free and critical media. The thesis also analyzes the impacts of continuous, increased, and harsher attacks on the lives and work of journalists, as well as on the overall media landscape in Slovakia.

## **Abstrakt**

Útoky na novinárov sa stali častejším fenoménom v západných demokraciách a stratégie vedúce k týmto útokom, ako aj ich dopady na žurnalistiku a demokraciu v slobodnom svete zostávajú nedostatočne preskúmané. Táto diplomová práca sa snaží vyplniť túto medzeru zameraním sa na útoky na novinárov na Slovensku počas prvých ôsmich mesiacov štvrtej vlády Roberta Fica, ktoré sa stali súčasťou politickej agendy vládných predstaviteľov. Analýza je založená na údajoch z pološtrukturovaných rozhovorov so 14 slovenskými novinármi z 8 rôznych redakcií, vrátane štyroch šéfredaktorov celoštátnych médií, Denníka N, Denníka SME, Aktuality.sk a Investigatívneho centra Jána Kuciaka. Pomocou metódy tzv. grounded theory táto práca vytvára kontextualizovaný vedecký koncept situácie na Slovensku, vysvetľujúci metódy a dôvody za nezvyčajne silnými a systematickými útokmi vlády na novinárov. Tieto útoky zahŕňajú osobné útoky, kontinuálnu nenávistnú kampaň proti rôznym médiám a ich zamestnancom, legislatívne zmeny a vykresľovanie novinárov ako bezpečnostnej hrozby, čím politici legitimizujú svoje útoky na slobodné a kritické médiá.

Dôležitú úlohu v tomto kontextualizovanom vedeckom koncepte zohráva akademická literatúra vysvetľujúca demokratický úpadok a informačnú autokraciu, ktoré sú v tomto prípade prítomné na Slovensku. Práca tiež ukazuje, že systematické útoky na novinárov sa zdajú byť súčasťou širšej politickej stratégie zameranej na oslabenie kontrolných mechanizmov a inštitúcií demokratického štátu, čím prispievajú k procesu oslabovania demokracie v krajine útokom na jeden z jej pilierov - dávaním médií pod neustály tlak politickej moci. Analýza

ukazuje, že politici sekuritizujú túto problematiku - používaním rétoriky strachu a označovaním nezávislých kritických médií za nepriateľov, ktorí potrebujú nové regulácie - na získanie verejnej podpory pre svoje kroky, zatiaľ čo skutočnou bezpečnostnou hrozbou pre slovenskú demokraciu sa zdajú byť práve tieto systematické útoky na slobodné a kritické médiá. Práca tiež analyzuje dopady neustálych, zvýšených a tvrdších útokov na život a prácu novinárov, ako aj na celkové mediálne prostredie na Slovensku.

## **Keywords**

journalism, democracy, democratic backsliding, free media, attacks on media, political agenda

## **Klíčová slova**

žurnalistika, demokracia, demokratický úpadok, slobodné médiá, útoky na médiá, politická agenda

## **Title**

Eroded resilience of democracy: Attacks on journalists as part of a political agenda in Slovakia

## **Název práce**

Erózia odolnosti demokracie: Útoky na novinárov ako súčasť politickej agendy na Slovensku

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# INTRODUCTION

Democracy and journalism are inherently interconnected, with a free press serving as a fundamental pillar of democracies. Independent, free, and diverse media are essential for delivering trustworthy news and information, creating an environment for vibrant public discourse, and helping to create an informed and engaged citizens, who are active and capable of sustaining democracy by participating and making well-informed decisions. Acting as watchdogs, the media rigorously examine those in authority, investigate and report on issues of public concern, thereby enhancing institutions and democratic processes (OHCHR, 2023). Press freedom supports basic democratic mechanisms such as rule of law in order to fight corruption, since independent journalists and free media have incentives to look for and investigate any crime and wrongdoing (Brunetti et al., 2003). Journalism is a profession working in the public interest, however, attacks on journalists have emerged as a troubling phenomenon. While before this was expected to have a higher frequency in authoritarian regimes, these types of attacks, single or systematic, are increasingly becoming a tool in the political struggles of supposedly free countries and societies, where Western democracy should be in rule (Guriev & Treisman, 2022).

Slovakia has a recent history of murdered journalists. In 2018, the assassination of journalist Ján Kuciak during the third term of Prime Minister Robert Fico marked a turning point. Kuciak was killed because of his investigative work and the murder mobilized massive protests resulting in the fall of the government (Cameron, 2018). The principals to the crime have been convicted, but the trial of those accused of ordering the murder remains unresolved and has been appealed to the Supreme Court for the second time (Holcova, 2023). As of September 2023, Fico has resumed office of a Prime Minister for a fourth term, during which journalists

have continued to face personal attacks and political pressure (Reporters Without Borders, 2023a) and Slovakia dropped 12 places in the Reporters Without Borders Press freedom Index for the year 2024 compared to 2023 (Reporters Without Borders, 2024a).

This master's thesis builds on various scientific concepts, data, and existing analyses. The literature review establishes a foundation of knowledge, spanning from the concept of the fourth estate and the importance of journalism for democracy (Powers, 2010; Carcasson, 2022) to the attacks on journalists, the securitization of the issue for the public (Wæver, 1995; Balzacq at al., 2016), and democratic backsliding (Little & Meng, 2023; Varol, 2014; Waldner & Lust, 2018). Key concepts include works on democratic backsliding and the theory of informational autocrats (Guriev & Treisman, 2020). The scholarly literature lacks extensive studies measuring the impact of political attacks on media freedom in democracies and analyzing both long-term and short-term effects. This thesis aims to fill this gap by analyzing the impacts of attacks on journalists and media and examining the potential threats to the level of democracy in Slovakia.

The second chapter explains the selection and methodology of the research methods used in this study. Understanding the impact of attacks on journalists by government politicians is best achieved through direct input from journalists. The methodology outlines data collection through semi-structured interviews with 14 Slovak journalists, including 4 editors-in-chief, from 8 different media - online, print, and TV channels. The selection of journalists backs the validity of this thesis and the subsequent analysis by coding is a crucial part of this research, as well as the subsequent grounded theory and the creation of a contextualized scientific concept, aiming to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Slovak politicians of the government coalition use threats and attacks against journalists?

RQ2: How do the attacks from government politicians affect Slovak journalists and the media landscape?

The third chapter covers the analysis and its results, being the foundation of the empirical dimension of this thesis. The chapter is divided into five sections, analyzing the personal experiences of journalists with attacks from government politicians during the first 8 months of Robert Fico's fourth term, as well as the general situation for Slovak media during this period. The analysis focuses on the methods and ways politicians use attacks against journalists and the impact of this behavior on individual journalists, newsrooms, the media environment, and the threat to Slovak democracy.

Grounded theory is developed based on the empirical findings of the analysis, together with various interpretations by using the concepts of securitization, democratic backsliding, and informational autocracy, offered in the fourth chapter of this thesis. The main limitation is the scope of the research - since the informational autocracy and democratic backsliding are complex concepts, for the more general and deeper understanding of both of them in Slovakia, additional research would be essential, including the condition of rule of law or the civil society. It usually comes as a package - attacks on media and news, independent courts, integrity of elections, opposition parties or civil society organizations and activists. All of these are working as a mechanism of resistance - to push back the threats of democracy (Norris, 2017, p. 11-13) However, media and journalists on their own are irreplaceable when it comes to functioning liberal democracy and therefore, having an academic research analyzing the attacks and their impacts is significant, which is a value that this thesis aims to deliver.

# 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

## 1.1 Fourth estate and the relevance of journalism in democracy

### 1.1.2 Role of media in liberal democracy

According to Powers (2010), independent press which is capable to work freely functions as the Edmund Burke's concept of the 'fourth estate', which means that journalism and media serve as a significant element in the system of governance where check and balances work, making sure an accountable behavior is not engaged by any of the groups (p. 257). This supports the idea that journalism affects the quality of democracy and policies it produces. As claimed by Warren Francke (1995), media and journalists influence state's policies and their major role is in the nature of their job - exposing conflicts of interests and the occurrence of corruption (p. 112). Carcasson (2022) in his article *Taking on Two Crises: Democracy and Journalism* claims that that the connection between journalism and democracy is inherent, just as the connection of major part of journalism with deliberation, thus the goal of deliberative journalism is to work in the public interest (such as serving as an independent watchdog over any powerful interests including the government), since it comes from its own essential nature (p. 17).

There are several types of empirical research, which suggest there is a relationship between media freedom as well as plurality, and the level of corruption, as argued by a research paper by Brunetti and Weder (2003, p. 1804-1805). According to a research report by Schauseil et al. (2019), there is a direct link between media and anti-corruption, which is to a significant extent based on the awareness of political actions (due to investigative journalism but not only) regarding politicians, policies, and the country's overall management. This enables citizens to

hold politicians accountable more easily, thereby strengthening the level of democracy (p. 3-4). Weaver (1977, p. 156) argues that media freedom requires absence of governmental and other restraints on the media together with the existence of conditions in the society which ensure the possibility to disseminate various types of ideas - plurality - to the audience of the general public (p. 156). Dallas and Ellis (2023) in their article *Reinventing Journalism to Strengthen Democracy* deal with the weaknesses of current level of liberal democracy and the necessity for the media to adapt to a new status quo. Only 14% of Republicans in 2016 reported trust in the media and 69% of both Republicans and Democrats in 2022 claimed to think “the nation’s democracy is in danger of collapse (p. 6-8). The issue with the attacks on journalists is not new, there are several studies from this millenium, which show the rise of attacks as well as the increase in requested assistance from journalists facing threats and violence (Julliard, 2010). The study by Heikkilä and Ahva (2014) shows the relevance of journalism, even though media news operates in a fragmented landscape due to social networks (p. 11-12). Many studies regarding the role of journalism and its functions are outdated in the modern world , where technologies but also other social and political changes have great impact on how the fourth estate looks and works now (Powers, 2010, p. 258). This is also applicable to the challenges which modern media and journalists face, in the long term, but also on a daily basis.

### **1.1.2 What happens when media are under attacked**

As journalism is so valuable to democracy, especially the quality of liberal democracy, attacks on journalists have a role in democratic backsliding, which is a crucial concept for this thesis. Little and Meng (2024) in their research article *Measuring Democratic Backsliding* come with several indicators, which influence the level of democracy and its potential backsliding. Crucial aspects in this process are attacks on the press (p. 4-8). Waldner and Lust (2018) in their article argues that democracy in the global level may be under threat and democratic recession is

something on the rise, yet point to the important fact that theoretically speaking, researchers are still dealing with backsliding more as a concept, than theory. Based on the authors, attempts to limit press may have a role depending on the extent of the issue (p. 109). When democratic subversion is in process, Grillo et al. (2023) argue that the government can propose legislation or pursue different types of measures, which weaken democracy, such as restricting media freedom (p. 5). Varol in his research paper (2014, p. 1679-1680) claims that authoritarians in the modern world may utilize legal mechanisms in order to monopolize their power. Again it's the concept, a process occurring more in nondemocracies due to its nature, however democracies are not resistant to it, and the democratic system makes it more problematic to determine (p. 1679-1681). Ronen (2022) writes about the acceleration of autocratization and claims that EU members together with other Western-democratic idols such as Japan or the United States are not resilient to the democratic erosion; and weakening the independent media is a part of a package for an illiberal leader, who aims to consolidate state power in an unprecedented way (p. 15).

Another important concept for this thesis is a theory of informational autocracy developed by Guriev and Treisman (2020). Authors of this theory explain how autocrats manage to keep the power not because of the element of ideology, but rather rely purely on the perception of the public, which they are convinced about their competency. In order to achieve this goal, journalistic restriction must take place (p. 2). Guriev and Treisman (2022) add to this perspective by their book *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century*, in which they explore how modern autocrats in the digital age have enhanced the art of manipulating information in order to win or maintain power. The book examines how these leaders use media and propaganda to succeed in suppressing their opponents together with creating an appearance of legitimacy and popular support of the public, all of this

fundamentally modifying the nature of dictatorship in the 21st century (p. x-xiii). Mark Galeotti (2023) in his book *The Weaponisation of Everything* explores the landscape of global conflict in modern times, where warfare extends beyond the usual battlefield into business, culture but also information - he examines how states try to exploit free media and manipulate journalists into spreading disinformation and shaping public perception, by which they extend a certain battlefield into the informational but also societal domains, achieving strategic objectives without using conventional warfare (p. 161-163).

This thesis aims to argue that politicians who target media as threat, may want to create a false security issue out of critical journalists and therefore Wæver (1995) famous research article *Securitization and Desecuritization* may be applied, as he claims that one of the ways how to make a concept of security wider is to make the security agenda wider, by including other threats, not just military ones (p. 49). Balzacq et al. (2016) in their research paper *'Securitization' revisited: theory and cases* analyzes empirical experience of securitization in areas, where the concept grew relevance in the past years, such as identity and migration or energy and the environment (p. 508-512) - different areas may be also due to the publishing date, however with possibly transferable principles or concepts applicable in the context of free critical media.

As independent media and critical journalists are so valuable for the quality and sustainability of democracy, this thesis aims to fill the gap in the academic literature by providing an analysis how the attacks against journalists become a security issue for both journalists, media landscape and profession as such, but also for the prevalence of democracy, which becomes eroded in an environment, where ruling politicians create systematic attacks in order to suppress free press.



## 1.2 Research regarding attacks against journalists and free media

There are several interesting studies about the level of hate and attacks on the U.S. journalists, mainly after the Donald Trump presidency (2016-2020). Yerlikaya and Aslan (2020) in their article *Social Media and Fake News in the Post-Trump Era: The Manipulation of politics in the Election Process* argue that new types of media can be used as a tool for consolidation of the power by the authoritarian motives and analyze the spread of fake news in the world politics in the era after Donald Trump presidency. Authors claim that major political results such as US elections in 2016 were deeply affected by the spread of fake news (p. 180-186). There are several research articles and studies about the attacks on journalists during and after Donald Trump 2017-2021 presidency. Koliska et al. (2020) in their research article come from the point of change and impacts - authors argue that journalists have been experiencing a completely different, hostile approach of the U.S. presidents towards media professionals, when Trump targeted them by continuous attacks and analyze how the journalists defend themselves as well as their profession (p. 4-5). Carlson et al. (2020) analyze the dimensions of Trump's assaults against journalists and provide patterns which have international applicability in countries where populist leaders tend to have higher popularity and media are more attacked (p. 3-8). U.S. nonpartisan fact tank Pew Research Center continuously deals with media and provides valuable analyzes of the industry, but also public perceptions and struggles of mainly U.S. media. Based on their report from June 2019, 50% of Americans see made-up news and information as a very big problem for the country at that time, which was more than racism (40%), terrorism (34%) or sexism (26%). Same report shows the polarization within the American population, as not all Americans had the same experience with the proclaimed made-up news. Far more Republicans (62%) claimed the made-up news are a very big problem for the United States, in comparison to 40% of Democrats and 58% of Republicans blames

journalists, in comparison to 20% of Democrats (Mitchell et al., 2019). Based on the Pew Research Center report from 2020, the majority of Americans agreed that it is important for journalists to serve as watchdogs over elected leaders (73%), but, interestingly, 35% of Americans though journalists are going too far as watchdogs (59% of Republicans, 14% of Democrats) (Jurkowitz & Mitchell, 2020). In 2022, in a survey of 11 899 U.S. journalists, 57% of them expressed they are extremely or very concerned about the possible future press restriction in the U.S. (Gottfried et al., 2022). In the same year, there were 34% fewer full-time journalists who cover U.S. state capitols compared to 2014 (Worden et al., 2022). The year after, in 2023, research by the Center showed that less Americans are following the traditional media than they used to (Forman-Katz, 2023). Another research just months after showed that social media are a more popular source of information for more Americans (Wang & Forman-Katz, 2024). For Americans in 2024, the most important personal trait of a journalist is whether they share their political view (Tomasik, 2024), an interesting but also significant aspect considering there is a always a part of public which agrees with the attacks and threats on journalists that politicians, not only from the U.S., start.

India is a flawed democracy (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023, p. 5) and journalists experience a variety of attempts to suppress their freedom. Research article by Bhat and Chadha (2022) deals with the supporters of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party who by attacking, trolling and abusing journalists help the Modi government in suppressing those media, which are doing their work freely in India (p. 6-8). Kulkarni (2012) in his article points out the lack of proper protection for Indian journalists, even though they have been attacked and some of them even murdered. Journalists in India continuously called for adequate measures, including legislation which would guarantee some level of protection, but all of that had been uncertain. Bhat (2023) conducted a very insightful study about the responses and

experience of Indian journalists who face online harassment, by in-depth interviews with 24 selected journalists. Research shows that the media which works in favor of the Modi government aren't supportive enough in order to protect their journalists facing attacks and social platforms are not cooperative enough in dealing with the issue (p. 8-9).

There are a few studies regarding the issue in Serbia as well. Đokić et al. (2020) in the brief research report deal with several cases of pressures and threats against Serbian journalists which happened during the Covid-19 pandemic (p. 14-15). Markov and Đorđević (2023) in their research article analyze mechanisms of anti-press discourse against Serbian journalists and based on 20 interviews search for coping mechanisms as well as with institutional support for media professionals (p. 285-286). Bajić and Zweers (2020) in their research report *The crisis of the journalistic profession in Serbia* analyze the struggles of Serbian media and attacks on journalists are one of the most significant ones. When in 2013, 23 Serbian journalists were attacked, each year from then it was worse, in 2019, 119 experienced attacks. Another problems are administrative-institutional pressures of media ownership. All of the issues discussed in the report lead to censorship and self-censorship of Serbian journalists in the mainstream media. Researchers point to the important link between bad conditions for journalists and the quality of reporting, which becomes more biased and poor (p. 12-15).

Coming to the Central European region, the most frequent country of interest research-wise is Hungary. Timothy Garton Ash (2019) in his article claims that Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán transformed Hungary into a “hybrid regime” in which the country is no longer democracy, but not dictatorship per se either. Garton Ash argues that punishment of independent media and consolidation of power over the other media was a fundamental part of how Orbán managed to make Hungary nondemocratic. The position of Viktor Orbán and

systematic attempts to suppress critical media and journalists is dealt with in the above mentioned book by Guriev and Treisman (2022) *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century*. There are several analyses, articles, and testimonies from journalists themselves about how Viktor Orbán constrained free critical media and remains to assault the ones still remaining (Reporters Without Borders, 2023; International Press Institute, 2023; Walker, 2021).

However, even though Slovakia experienced a murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak in 2018 and there are several indicators, that situation for journalists is becoming worse and political situation does have an effect (Reporters Without Borders, 2024a; Safe Journalism, 2024, p. 8-11) there is a lack of proper academic study of this phenomenon and a research gap, which this thesis aim to fill. Not just the phenomenon of attacks against journalists, but also the role of ruling politicians and the after-effect on the level of democracy.

### **1.3 Slovakia's context**

#### **1.3.1 Evolution of the issue in the young democratic country**

The period of Vladimír Mečiar as Prime Minister (1990-1991, 1992-1994, 1994-1998) was turbulent and challenging for the functioning of free media in Slovakia. Even though this government tried to maintain the democratization process in the eyes of the international public, it failed deeply. Attacks on the media under Mečiar's government varied in nature and type. Privatization and control of media outlets (e.g. state publishing house Danubiaprint privatized with the direct link to the ruling party in 1997, control over public STV channel), suppression of independent media (temporary suspension of Radio Twist after critical reporting), harassment and intimidation of journalists (beaten reporters, arson of cars, burglaries to the newsrooms, verbal and physical attacks on journalists by Mečiar himself), legal and

administrative pressure (journalists from non-state media barred from news conferences) and more (Committee to Protect Journalist, 1998). Some of the impacts of attacks and constant anti-campaigns included difficult working conditions for journalists and fears about the consequences of their work due to intimidation by politicians and explicit cases where there was evidence or serious suspicion that politicians crossed the line of legality in pursuit of their political goals. All in all, fundamental principles of free press were assaulted by Vladimir Mečiar's media policies. It was a damage to Slovak civil society, a threat to the transition to democracy and a great harm to the Slovak reputation in the international community (Rosenberger, 1994, p. 25-26). According to Trantidis (2021) Slovakia during Mečiar's ruling experienced strong efforts of autocratisation and attacks on press were part of the process for Mečiar (p. 8-12), Gill (2002) in the Slovak case of that period works with the term façade democracies (p. 6-8). Significant part of Mečiar's failure and the success of beating him comes from the civil society, opposition cooperation and the ability to fund media coverage which enabled fair competition during 1998 elections, all together resisting autocratisation (Trantidis, 2021, p. 8-12).

Fico's relationship evolved and changed during each of his governments. During his first period between the years 2006-2010 (Government Office of the Slovak Republic, 2024a), there is a record of several incidents. In 2007 Fico verbally attacked media by saying some of them are political opposition (ČTK & SITA, 2007), in 2009, Fico called journalists "pigs who are terrorizing his family" (Vasilko & Zsilleová, 2009). Between 2007 and 2012, Fico sued various Slovak media outlets for a total of 235,294 euros. He won a case where the weekly magazine Trend labeled him as a "Thief of Future Pensions" on its cover. The highest amount he received was from the publisher Plus 7 dní, whose journalists claimed that he called them "dirty bastards" (in Slovak 'špinaví hajzli'). Fico argued in court that he does not use such expressions at all (Tódová, 2012). The second government of Robert Fico (2012-2016) (Government

Office of the Slovak Republic, 2024b) was single-party; Smer won the elections and gained a parliamentary majority, enabling them to form a government without the need for a political coalition. Together with that, the language used on journalists had become more harsh, which intensified in 2016. At a press conference related to the Slovak Republic's presidency of the Council of the European Union, he referred to journalists as “some of you are dirty anti-Slovak prostitutes, and I stand by this expression,” (Tódová, 2016). During Fico's third government, Slovakia and the journalistic community experienced an unprecedented attack; on February 21, 2018, investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová were murdered in their home in Veľká Mača (Germanova, 2018). The murder of Kuciak had a temporary calming effect on the attacks on journalists by politicians, but just for a few months. After taking office as Prime Minister for the fourth time in the Fall 2023, Fico made an unprecedented move by severing communication with selected media outlets—TV Markíza, Denník N, Denník SME, and Aktuality.sk—at the end of October and early November 2023, until they "fulfill their legal duty." According to Fico, these media are hostile and biased against him and his government and do not report truthfully and promptly about the activities of the Slovak government and its leader. "We will review their permits to enter and work at the Government Office," Fico said, "and until a decision is made, they will be unwanted guests at the Government Office" (ALA & TASR, 2023). Journalists from these media were eventually allowed into the Government Office, but government officials often still refuse to answer their questions normally. A record from the Question Hour in the National Council of the Slovak Republic in November 2023 shows Fico's stance in his response to MP Dostál, where Fico stated that "some media openly admit to being hostile towards the Slovak government and that they will go after the government." Whether the journalists of these media feel like enemies of the government and their perception of this measure is discussed in this thesis analysis. Fico said that they "want to set rules for media behavior" and criticized the criticism of disinformation media. "Who gave

you the right to say who is a disinformant, who is a conspirator, and who is an alternative news source? Nothing like that exists. ... But I want to tell you that the era is definitely over, Mr. MP, when the media ruled this state, and especially not hostile media, they will not be able to do what they have done so far," Fico said (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2023). Such statements and specific steps indicate efforts to hinder the work of independent critical media and, conversely, to favor and legitimize so-called disinformation portals that do not perform the function of traditional media but rather work with unverified information, hoaxes, or spread propaganda. The phenomenon of transitioning to these portals is also discussed in the analytical part of this thesis.

Norris (2019) in her research paper *Is Western Democracy Backsliding? Diagnosing the Risks* (2019, p. 3) claims that populist leaders (and she uses Donald Trump as an example) usually profit from low trust of the public in the establishment, therefore it is a common practice of these leaders to further damage the faith in the media and their legitimate role, for instance by marking them as the enemy of the people, as Trump does (p. 3), or as in Slovak case, Fico and his political colleagues do.

### **1.3.2 Specific cases in 2023-2024**

The deteriorating environment for journalists is represented by an increasing number of attacks that are more calculated, targeted, personal, and have significant consequences. Slovakia in 2023 and 2024 had several such cases, and here are a few to comprehend how the situation has changed for journalists since the first government of Robert Fico in the times during his tenure.

In February 2023, a host of the public broadcaster RTVS refused to allow an uninvited guest, Smer party MP Ľuboš Blaha, into a political discussion. Blaha arrived at the recording session without an invitation. In response, Smer and Blaha released an aggressive video in which Blaha

spoke about censorship and the end of freedom of speech (SMER - Sociálna demokracia, 2023). According to an analysis by the Investigative Center of Jan Kuciak, the video spread widely through disinformation portals and Smer politicians. Smer's leader, Fico, joined the attacks and held a press conference in front of the public broadcaster, where he threatened the RTVS director, saying he would "go after his neck." The attacks also targeted Jančkárová, who began receiving threats of torture, death, and rape (Kőváry Sólomos, 2023a). The threats were so serious that the National Criminal Agency began an investigation and assigned police protection to the host (Denník N, 2023a). Colleagues from various Slovak newsrooms supported the host (Denník N, 2023b), as did Reporters Without Borders (Osvaldová, 2023).

Unprecedented attack, not just in Slovakia's context, was a widely circulated AI-generated video which appeared during the moratorium just two days before the parliamentary elections in 2023. Video, with the intention to mislead voters and harm the reputation of Tódová, contains a fake phone conversation between Denník N journalist Monika Tódová and leader of Progressive Slovakia party, Michal Šimečka (Women Press Freedom, 2023). In the fictitious conversation, they talk about how they managed to secure the manipulation of election votes (Spurný, 2023). Based on the press freedom organizations, this was one of the first cases when AI was used in order to discredit a journalists (Kőváry Sólomos, 2023b) and probably the first one this big to attempt a manipulation of elections by spreading a lie which was widely shared, after which various experts claimed the democracy is not ready for deepfakes (Meaker, 2023). Slovak police initially did not want to investigate the matter as a potential impact on the elections or election fraud, even though it was virally spread. This decision was reversed by the prosecution (Reporters Without Borders, 2024b). Chesney and Keats Citron (2019) in their research paper *Deep Fakes: A Looming Challenge for Privacy, Democracy, and National Security* analyze the capable impacts of deepfakes, which include manipulation of elections,



but also eroding trust in institutions and distortion of democratic discourse, therefore a security issue for the system, by harming its stability and resilience (p. 1776-1778)

Attacks on journalists which are continuous, systematic and personal may have various results, one of them being the decision of the journalists to stop doing the job. This was a temporary, yet significant for the context, situation of one of the most well-known Slovak journalists, Zuzana Kovačič Hanzelová. In February 2024, during the 4th government of Robert Fico, she shared the text “For a moment, for the last time” (Kovačič Hanzelová, 2024) in which she described her experience in the past years, but mainly past months, with continuous attacks, threats and hateful campaign against her and her journalistic colleagues, which comes from politicians (she mentions politicians from Smer party), but also disinfo platforms and general public - among threats online Kovačič Hanzelová experienced physical attack on the street just month before her public decision to stop with the profession for a few months. In June 2024 she announced she is coming back (Tódová, 2024).

Another example of a hostile environment for media operations during the 4th government of Fico is the cancellation of popular political discussions on Slovak television channels. The main political debate program on TV JOJ was "Na hrane," where host Jana Krescanko Dibáková engaged in weekly duels of two politicians—one from the coalition and one from the opposition. However, politicians from the ruling coalition in 2024 suddenly agreed to stop participating in the show, rendering it unsustainable. As a result, in April 2024, Krescanko Dibáková decided to leave the television station after 22 years, and the station decided not to replace her, ending the program entirely (Dedinský, 2024). In May 2024, Slovakia's most-watched political debate program, "Na telo," on Televízia Markíza ended. Host Michal Kovačič, during the airing on May 26, 2024, informed viewers about the ongoing struggle over

the direction of TV Markíza's news coverage. According to Kovačič, both he and his colleagues had been facing pressures not only from politicians but also from their own management, which the newsroom had managed to resist. He mentioned the boycott by politicians, which, besides affecting "Na hrane" on TV JOJ, also impacted Markíza, making the smooth running of the show difficult. "Slovakia is currently experiencing a battle over the Orbanization of our televisions. The public debate is focused on the future of RTVS (*public broadcaster*), but this struggle is actually happening everywhere. It is quiet and stealthily. Even if it doesn't seem like it now, if we don't stop it, it will have devastating consequences for Slovak democracy," Kovačič said during the show (Debnár, 2024a). In response, TV Markíza decided to cancel the scheduled episodes of "Na telo," and it is unclear whether the show will ever return or in what form (Debnár, 2024b). Kovačič was dismissed in June after 16 years with the network (Osvaldová, 2024).

### **1.3.3 Attacks on public broadcaster under the fourth Fico's government**

Not only political shows but also the public broadcaster RTVS was canceled. The fourth government of Robert Fico began on October 25, 2024, after being appointed by President Zuzana Čaputová (Pálka, 2023). Minister of Culture Martina Šimkovičová has announced changes for RTVS from the beginning. Initially, the plan was to split the institution into two separate entities—radio and television—and also change the funding mechanism (TASR, 2023). Instead of receiving the original 0.17% of GDP, the public broadcaster was to get only 0.12% of Slovakia's GDP (SITA, 2023). By 2024, Šimkovičová proposed a completely different plan—to abolish RTVS and replace it with a new entity, STVR (Mikušovič & Osvaldová, 2024). RTVS was officially canceled by the end of June 2024 (Osvaldová et al., 2024).

#### 1.4 What data says?

Research report done by Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (2022) shows that threats against journalists worsened in 2022, as journalists experienced intense political violence. Report acknowledges that many attackers remain hidden or unknown, and it is not always easy to identify several of them (p. 2-3). The Annual assessment of press freedom in Europe published by the Council of Europe (2024) mentions several issues and attack Slovak media experienced in 2023, including Smer party suing political commentators for their criticism of the party and Robert Fico, the attacks on Marta Jančkárová, or the budget interventions in the public broadcaster. There is some valuable data conducted by organizations, which deal with attacks against journalists, in the context of Slovakia (p. 54-62). The database of the Committee to Protect Journalists records 0 cases of attacks in the country between the years 2020-2024 because of their methodology and the collection of data (they only record journalists imprisoned, missing, or killed - motive confirmed) (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2024). However, there are other channels which claim otherwise. Mapping media freedom by the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom records 16 attacks on Slovak journalists in the period of 21st February and 31st December 2023. 9 out of 16 attacks were done by Smer party, its politicians, or the party's leader himself, current Prime Minister Robert Fico. Attacks by Smer or its politicians involve lawsuits, verbal attacks and accusation of journalists' corruption, discreditation, review of accreditation for journalists from 'hostile media' or slash of budget for the public broadcaster (European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, 2024). In comparison to 16 recorded cases of attacks in the mentioned period, Investigative Center of Jan Kuciak and its safety platform for Slovak journalists, Safe Journalism, record even more incidents - 48 - and they the real number is higher, because these are the attacks journalists report themselves and not everybody does that (Safe Journalism, 2024). Situation in 2024 is worse regarding the number of recorded attacks by ICJK. In the

first 6 months of 2024, the safety platform monitors the same number of attacks - 48 - as during 10 months in 2023 (Farská, 2024).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Based on the literature and the gaps in theoretical basis for the element of attacks on journalists and their potential impact on the level of democracy, this thesis aims to answer the research questions (*How do Slovak politicians of the government coalition use threats and attacks against journalists?* and *How do the attacks from government politicians affect Slovak journalists and the media landscape?*) by conducting semi-structured interviews with selected Slovak journalists, providing inductive analysis and using the grounded theory as a method to develop contextualized scientific concept of the situation in Slovakia. It is important to note that the specific phrasing of the first research question was confirmed after the conduction of the analysis, the second research question unexpectedly arose from the data after its collection, analysis and later interpretation.

Grounded theory as a case design is applied in the research, which requires theoretical reconstruction of the case and theory development. The research questions are asked in the sense of “What happened in this instance? How can we reconstruct processes and actions? How can scientific concepts and theories be used to illuminate a case or a phenomenon?” (Bukve, 2019, p. 126). This method of case-based theory building was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and its core is based on coding, synthesizing and abstracting data with the purpose of developing theories, hypotheses, or contextualized scientific concepts (Bukve, 2019, p. 137-

138). For this purpose, this thesis applies a qualitative method of semi-structured interviews with selected Slovak journalists.

Conducting interviews with journalists is essential for this research as the interviews make it possible to get to know the experiences and viewpoints of those who are actively engaged in the field and have experience with their media professional relationship with politicians. Other than that, journalists can also provide valuable insights into the conditions of media in Slovakia and dynamics of public opinion regarding their own profession. Results from semi-structured interviews have a potential to represent detailed and contextually relevant data that might not be accessible through other methods such as surveys or purely quantitative methods. As mentioned in the literature review, there is little data about the attacks against journalists and media in Slovakia and their scope is only very limited. By conducting this research, this thesis aims to fill the gap regarding the understanding of the situation for journalists in Slovakia during the fourth government of Robert Fico and potential security issues that might arise in this. This method also allows for probing deeper into unexpected themes that arise during the conversation.

As per participants suitable for the research, this thesis uses the information-oriented selection of journalists, who are expected to have a valuable informational content about the topic, with the goal to maximize the utility of the information of this sample, so that the subsequent analysis and developing the grounded theory may be based on the relevant knowledge derived from the interviews (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 57-58).

Journalists interviewed for the purpose of this research:

Beata Balogová, editor-in-chief, Denník SME

Peter Bárdy, editor-in-chief, Aktuality.sk

Matúš Kostolný, editor-in-chief, Denník N

Lukáš Diko, editor-in-chief, Investigative Center of Ján Kuciak

Jana Krescanko Dibáková, moderator, ex-TV JOJ

Mária Benedikovičová, editor, Denník N

Marta Jančkárová, moderator, RTVS

Martin M. Šimečka, journalist, Denník N

Martina Töröková, journalist, TV Markiza

Richard Dírer, moderator, ex- TV TA3

Soňa Mäkká, editor, Denník N

Vladimír Šnidl, editor, Denník N

Karin Kóváry Sólymos, investigative reporter, Investigative Center of Ján Kuciak

Matej Príbelský, editor, Aktuality.sk

Interviews were done between 28th of May 2024 and 14th of June 2024. Every journalist signed a Consent Form and every one of them consented to having their personal identity (name) disclosed in the products of the research, their personal identity (media name) disclosed in the products of the research and consented to being quoted in the products of the research. Interviews were based on a set of questions concerning their personal experience, media landscape, and their perception of struggles of their profession with connection to the society. 11 out of 14 interviews were conducted in a personal meeting and recorded, 3 journalists received the set questions and submitted written answers. The average time of one recorded interview was 37 minutes and 48 seconds. Interview studies usually have around 15 participants, as this number makes practical handling of the data possible (Brinkmann, 2013,

p. 59). All interviews were transcribed and together with written answers resulted in 98 pages of material.

This material underwent subsequent coding, a common method used in grounded theory. Even though grounded theory is by some scholars qualified as inherently inductive (Brinkman, 2013, p. 62-63), there are other opinions which emphasize that there are both inductive and deductive components of the method (Tucker, 2014, p. 7) and that is the case of this thesis as well.

The codes were inductively developed based on the comparison of individual interview responses and the themes they presented, imposing on paragraphs or words. The codes are not mutually exclusive but rather even overlap in some cases, which is a typical event in the grounded theory (Tucker, 2014, p. 7-8). The process involved constant comparison of the potential concepts and codes, recoding and merging the codes until the final version. Some of the codes, and even one full chapter of the analytical part (about the history of the attacks experienced by journalists in the past decades), had to be erased, because the length was too extensive for a master's thesis and I chose to dig deeper into other codes and concepts, which I evaluated as more relevant for this thesis. Categories and subcategories were developed through the comparison of data and codes, forming the framework for the analysis of this thesis, which resulted in the final subchapters and their respective particular parts.

Following the actual data analysis and results, transferring their interpretation lead into the newly developed contextualized scientific concept of the situation in Slovakia by using the results of the inductive components of the method together with the deductive ones. In order to provide the axial coding and identify larger concepts relevant to this thesis, such as democratic backsliding or informational autocracy, it was necessary to determine the links or

distinctions between each other, with the help of literature concerning these issues (Tucker, 2014, p. 8-9). Yet again, the process is more complex than usual content analysis and choosing the right basis in literature and already existing scientific concepts was to large extent influenced by the contents of the answers in the interviews, mixing the inductive approach in the first instance, applying deduction when creating the contextualized scientific concept of the situation in Slovakia and again getting back to the results of inductive approach to check whether they are coherent, makes sense and are backed by the results as well as valid arguments, altogether creating a functioning grounded theory applied in research.

The limitation of this method is the qualitative nature of the research, as well as results, and I hope that further analyses using quantitative methods as well, will be developed in the future, in order to analyze and understand the phenomenon on a deeper level. I also want to address my potential bias, as for the past 17 months I have been working as a project coordinator of a safety platform for Slovak journalists, Safe journalism, established by the Investigative Center of Jan Kuciak. I have done my best to deal with the topic of this thesis professionally and I truly believe my position has offered me valuable prior insights into the topic and environment.

### **3. ANALYSIS**

#### **3.1. Attacks - The Present**

Most journalists agreed in their responses that they experienced attacks or hostile behavior during their profession under all governments, coming from politicians of various political parties. However, all respondents agreed that the situation is specific during the ongoing fourth government of Robert Fico.



### 3.1.1 Comparison of the Current Situation with the Past

From interviews with journalists, it is evident that the situation has changed with the onset of the fourth government of Robert Fico. Significant changes are in intensity—attacks occur much more frequently now. While similar incidents used to happen occasionally, they now occur almost on a daily basis. There is also a difference in the nature of the attacks—they are more crude and personal. A notable change is that these attacks are often not isolated but can be considered part of a campaign against a particular newsroom or a specific media outlet. Unlike in the past, when attacks were somewhat random and often part of unplanned political communication, today, they are deliberate, and politicians use them intentionally for their communication or campaign purposes, seeing them as a means to achieve their goals. It is impossible to pinpoint a single specific point or moment that can be considered the ultimate turning point due to the continuous nature of the process. Most journalists agreed that the parliamentary elections were crucial in shaping how journalists and media would be discussed in the public sphere, based on how government politicians communicate about them. Some journalists noticed heightened aggression and hostility starting in January-February 2024, while others felt it before the parliamentary elections during the political campaign, and one journalist describes a stronger turning point before the presidential elections in March-April 2024.

“To be honest, all those (past attacks) were things of much lower intensity compared to today. Today it is a completely different story. ... This is a targeted attack on the media. It’s a calculated attack. They really want to destroy the media. It’s not a reaction. All their claims about reacting to what journalists write are just excuses. It’s part of a deliberate strategy to destroy free media. And that’s the difference. And those personal attacks are part of it.” (Martin M. Šimečka)

The fundamental difference between the attacks journalists experience from government politicians during the fourth government of Robert Fico and those they experienced in the past is the official endorsement of this theme, creating a new problem in Slovakia named “the media.” Journalists repeatedly talk about systematic attacks that are inherently different from those in the past. This reality results in various impacts, such as more hostile public reactions towards the media, undermining the credibility and legitimacy of the media, or creating a dangerous environment for journalists in both their professional and personal lives—impacts that are discussed in more detail in the subsequent subchapter of the findings.

### **3.1.2 Personal Experience**

Most journalists who participated in the research (11 out of 14) have personal experiences of being targeted by attacks from politicians of the ruling coalition during the fourth government of Robert Fico. Some journalists could describe specific situations they experienced, while others found it difficult to recall the most significant incidents because there have been so many recently. Three out of four participating editors-in-chief have repeatedly experienced personal attacks from coalition politicians, and all editors-in-chief have noted increased attacks on their newsrooms. The attacks from politicians are mostly verbal, occurring during press conferences or as part of politicians' communication on social media. Less frequently, attacks have occurred during interviews with journalists or in private communication between politicians and journalists.

“I experience attacks mainly because I represent SME. Therefore, whenever someone says that SME is an anti-government medium, it gets personalized in me. ... Recently, Andrej Danko (*note: chairman of SNS*), when talking about the hostile approach of the media at a press conference, also mentioned the editor-in-chief of Denník SME and the editor-in-chief

of Denník N. Often, when politicians label my medium, or SME, as anti-government, it also concerns me.” (Beata Balogová)

“Currently, my name or Denník N, of which I am the editor-in-chief, they deal with it quite often, I would say on a daily basis.” (Matúš Kostolný)

“Yes, I have experienced several verbal attacks from representatives of the current government, including the leaders of 2 of the 3 coalition parties, Robert Fico and Andrej Danko. From Andrej Danko, it was very regular; in recent times, he mentioned my name in a demeaning way at almost every other press conference. I have also been repeatedly attacked by some lower-ranking coalition politicians.” (Peter Bárdy)

“Several representatives, such as Roman Michelko, Secretary General of the Ministry of Culture, have attacked the Investigative Center of Ján Kuciak (ICJK) and its work. For instance, he wrote on Telegram that ICJK would be treated when we reported on disinformation spreaders on Telegram. Another example is Tibor Gašpar, who accused ICJK of being agents or a secret service. However, I do not have direct personal experience with such attacks.” (Lukáš Diko)

Politicians who most frequently attack journalists, mentioned most often in interviews, include Robert Fico (Prime Minister, Smer), Erik Kaliňák (MP, elected MEP, Smer), Ľuboš Blaha (MP, elected MEP, Smer), and Andrej Danko (MP, SNS). Repeated attacks also come from Richard Gluck (MP, Smer), Tomáš Taraba (Minister, SNS), and Filip Kuffa (State Secretary, SNS). From opposition politicians, journalists did not usually mention anyone for the current status, but those who did mentioned Igor Matovič (MP, Slovensko Movement, formerly OĽaNO).

“I have experienced several attacks from politicians, including specific, direct, I was named in videos from Robert Fico. ... Of course, there were personal attacks, ad hominem attacks even directly in broadcasts, repeated mentions and shaming in posts by people like Ľuboš Blaha and similar defamatory statements...” (Jana Krescanko Dibáková)

“There have been so many that I can’t even recall the latest ones at the moment. It all blends together. I can't remember anyone who, when I sent them questions, didn't enter the attack phase. ... It is definitely worse now, given that politicians' language has become very vulgar.” (Mária Benedikovičová)

In journalists' responses, a recurring narrative emerged that politicians during the latest ongoing government are much more volatile and their reactions are not always predictable—they enter a confrontational or attacking mode even when journalists do not expect it. This represents a change—while in the past politicians used attacks as a method to avoid uncomfortable questions, during the latest government of Robert Fico, it has become more systematic, with several government politicians making attacks a part of their political agenda. Most journalists who participated in this research described how politicians used their attacks as content for their social media, creating videos, posts, and content that could be widely disseminated. This content is generally unpredictable and often contradicts reality and facts—the politician becomes the narrator of a story in which the journalist is the target serving their goals. The impacts of this behavior are addressed in the subsequent sections of this research. An important fact is that, based on journalists' experiences, public attacks from politicians are never isolated and translate into attacks from the public, who follow this example.

“I have experienced several attacks from politicians in the form of public statements. For example, last year, after RTVS decided not to let Smer-SD politician Ľuboš Blaha on the air (as it was a violation of conditions, the invitations were sent by name, and the party did not notify the change in advance). Smer organized a press conference where several of its politicians slandered me (even though the decision not to let Mr. Blaha on the air came from the management and dramaturgy, and I just agreed). Subsequently, I began receiving hateful messages from party supporters. They threatened me with beating, rape, and murder. It escalated to the point where I was assigned police protection. At that time, I was

also going through a difficult personal situation, so it didn't help my peace of mind. One of the Smer politicians also repeatedly targeted me in misleading and manipulative social media posts.” (Marta Jančárová)

As mentioned earlier, it is often not a single isolated case but a combination of attacks from a politician against a particular journalist. Ľuboš Blaha is a politician who repeatedly attacks journalists, and his statements are almost always aggressive, aiming to demean by using derogatory and insulting names and comments. Several journalists who participated in this research have personal experience with attacks from Blaha.

“Every Sunday, Ľuboš Blaha, with apologies, vomited on me in his circular or his 15 points. While I did not consider it pleasant, standard, or desirable political folklore, that’s how it has been.” (Richard Dírer)

Dírer’s statement describes a phenomenon frequently mentioned in the interviews—journalists have been under long-term attack from politicians and have become more used to it according to their words. For some, it serves as a defense mechanism allowing them to continue their work, while for others, the current situation is so different from the ‘normal state’ that they are considering what to do next. This aspect is addressed in the Impacts section.

Most of the loudest attacks come from members of the strongest party, SMER, including its leader Prime Minister Robert Fico. However, SMER is not the only party in the ruling coalition whose members regularly attack the media, with their rhetoric intensifying and having greater impacts. Martina Töröková describes her experience with the Minister of the Environment from SNS, Tomáš Taraba, as follows:

“This year, I have been repeatedly targeted by SNS nominee, Minister of Environment Tomáš Taraba. This is probably related to my systematic coverage of certain issues that he

addresses in ways conflicting with expert arguments. Instead of engaging in a substantive debate, I experience personal attacks and revenge-based messages.

The most prominent attacks are public knowledge because the minister publishes them on social media, where he has, by the way, blocked me.

Besides verbally formulated attacks, I also experienced a direct staged attack. At the National Council of the Slovak Republic, I went to ask an elementary question about resolving bear problems. The minister did not answer, so I repeated the question five times. When he checked that someone from his team was filming him, he twisted my question absurdly and started claiming to his camera that I wanted bears to harm people and that I was frustrated with the entire television because of Ivan Korčok's defeat. I urged him not to twist my words and protested. He posted the video without context, dominated by his accusations. The incident was beyond any standards of decent society; of course, I did not let myself be provoked.” (Martina Töröková)

Soňa Mäkká also had an experience with an SNS politician, being attacked by the State Secretary of the Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic, Filip Kuffa (SNS).

“He posted a video on Facebook where he insulted me, and it is still publicly accessible.”  
(Soňa Mäkká)

Several journalists agreed that they could not track all the attacks against them at the time of the interview and in the weeks preceding it because the volume was higher than they were used to in the past. Besides verbal attacks, journalists have also experienced other types of attacks and incidents from politicians. Peter Bárdy was one of the journalists confronted by a group of SMER MPs led by Erik Kaliňák during the launch of his book in September 2023. Kaliňák and his colleagues criticized Bárdy and recorded a video of the entire episode, which they edited and posted on their social media, calling Bárdy and his colleagues “desperate cowards from

liberal cafés” (Farská & Kőváry Sólomos, 2023) whom they were not afraid of. Bárdy was not the only one attacked by this MP group; Kaliňák and his group, calling themselves “Smer Wolves,” in February 2024 followed and recorded Denník N commentator Marián Leško in the streets of Bratislava because they disliked his articles (Šnidl, 2024). Some of the journalists mentioned these cases in the interviews. Erik Kaliňák, an MP, chief advisor to the Prime Minister, and newly elected MEP, has frequently attacked Slovak journalists in recent months. Despite being an MP for only a few months, he has already carried out several attacks, including filing a criminal complaint. Criminal complaints and legal threats are one type of attack politicians can use to intimidate journalists. Several journalists have experienced verbal threats that a politician would seek legal action against their journalistic work. Martin M. Šimečka has had such an experience, with Kaliňák and his party and parliamentary colleagues filing a criminal complaint in February 2024 against him for allegedly defaming the Slovak nation because he called Slovaks a cowardly nation (SITA, 2024). Šimečka has already been summoned for questioning in the matter.

“I went for questioning at the place where I used to go during communism. So it was a somewhat amusing déjà vu. The investigator was very civilized; I felt he was indicating that this was not a criminal offense. Even though I was at the department fighting extremism because I was classified as an extremist for defaming the Slovak nation. So far, it ended there. He indicated, although I don't know if it will end like this, that it would probably be dismissed. He said, 'but you know, they can file a complaint to the prosecutor, the prosecutor will return it saying it needs to be addressed. And then it may all start over again.' So that's the situation I am in.” (Martin M. Šimečka)

Some statements from politicians that journalists experience are not explicit attacks but have the same impact in practice. This is discussed in the Impacts section.

### **3.1.3 SME, N, Aktuality, Markíza - Hostile Media**

After the Smer party came to power, they initiated a campaign to label certain media outlets as hostile. This narrative has significantly intensified compared to the past, with specific steps done by the government, as discussed in the literature review.

None of the journalists who participated in this research feel like enemies of the government, nor do they believe that the government should be their enemy. Some journalists think this might be a common part of political battles, but they perceive the current situation as much more intense than in the past. They often associate it with the frequently mentioned strategy of labeling media to make them appear as unreliable sources of information in the eyes of the public. By using labels like “enemies,” they devalue the media’s legitimacy and divert public attention from the fundamental role of the media—to hold state power accountable. Most journalists stated that they feel they are working in the public interest and serving the public in their journalistic work.

“I strongly disagree with how we are labeled because we are not enemies of the government at all. And it may sound like a cliché, but the media are the watchdogs of democracy, and they are supposed to look at what the government is doing and write about the steps it takes. If it's worth criticizing, then that criticism should be published. I don't see this activity as being hostile.” (Mária Benedikovičová)

Some journalists emphasized that they consider such labeling unfair. More on this phenomenon is discussed in the Impacts section and Democracy-Autocracy section.

### **3.1.4 New Relationship of the Government with the Media**

The interviews reveal that, besides the increased number of attacks by government politicians, the overall stance towards the media has changed, becoming more aggressive. Attacks on journalists and newsrooms have become not only a tool of political combat but also part of the political agenda itself. The traditionally tense relationship between journalists and politicians



has been disrupted and is no longer balanced because politicians are trying to portray journalists as enemies of Slovak society. This attitude is primarily from the Smer and SNS parties. In practice, this includes several measures and steps—increased number of attacks on the media, increased attacks on specific journalists, restrictions on certain media outlets to whom politicians refuse to provide answers and information (Denník SME, Denník N, Aktuality, TV Markíza), and legislative changes and proposals aimed at regulating the media market and journalistic work, which journalists see as attempts to weaken media freedom. Most journalists have experienced these tools at some point in their careers, but they all agreed that the situation during the fourth government of Robert Fico is more intense and that has various impacts.

“This political term is exceptional in that the ruling coalition decided to define traditional critical media as their political enemies. It’s hard to defend against this when you know you are not political opponents. We (*note: media and journalists*) are not in a campaign, we are not seeking voters' favor, we are not aspiring to run the state. We stick to our tasks, and someone is distorting public opinion by putting us in a position where we do not belong by virtue of our roles.” (Martina Töröková)

### **3.1.5 Personal Nature of Attacks / Personalization**

One of the significant differences in the relationship between politicians and journalists is not only the intensity but also the nature of the attacks. These attacks have become extraordinarily personal. Politicians, such as Prime Minister Robert Fico, MPs Erik Kaliňák and Richard Gluck, or ministers Tomáš Taraba and Martina Šimkovičová, do not just attack entire newsrooms; often, the targets are individual journalists, and the attacks sometimes concern the journalists' personal lives. In the attacks during the first months of Fico’s fourth government, politicians have mentioned journalists' personal lives, making the attacks more personal, which journalists see as a change compared to the past.

“What is very new is that it’s different when someone mentions newsrooms like Aktuality, Denník N, SME, and it’s much, much different when specific names of specific journalists are mentioned. It started, I think, as a trend in the summer (*note: 2023*) when they started mentioning Monika Tódová because she was on vacation with a judge. That was very personal. It involved her personal life a lot, and we still see that this trend is changing.”  
(Matej Příbelský)

In this respect, attacks are sharper against female journalists, with politicians attacking their private lives, trying to ridicule their education, judgment, or overall ability to be journalists. This phenomenon also affects men, but there are fewer and less harsh cases.

## **3.2 Televisions - Public RTVS, TV JOJ, TV Markíza, TA3**

### **3.2.1 Changes for Public RTVS**

All interviewed journalists believe or fear that the legislative change to abolish RTVS and replace it with the new STVR aims to gain political control over the content of the news. Journalists see this move by the government as an attempt to seize power over the public media. Minister of Culture Martina Šimkovičová (SNS) and her colleague, Minister of the Environment Tomáš Taraba (SNS), have stated in some of their declarations that they do not intend to influence RTVS news or its content. None of the journalists who participated in this research believe these statements; on the contrary, they see the changes as intimidating and potentially conflicting with the European Media Freedom Act. According to several journalists, Šimkovičová and the government’s goal in changing the entire institution was to remove Ľuboš Machaj as the general director of the public broadcaster and establish new bodies within the institution that the political power could control more effectively.

“When it comes to RTVS and STVR, it's all about settling scores with the management. ... What they are changing or aiming for is to avoid waiting for the end of the management's contract, so they can fire them and put their own people in place, who will ensure that no unacceptable situations for the coalition occur, like someone criticizing them or negative news appearing against them. ... The person who put the law together (*note: Lukáš Machala*), when asked by an RTVS reporter whether the Earth is round, said he couldn't verify it because he had never been to space. So we are not just dealing with, in quotes, just influencing the news because you can influence the news by not having quality people there.”  
(Peter Bárty)

According to journalists, it is clear that politicians want the power to make interventions in news reporting, thereby reducing the freedom of the public media. Šimkovičová, along with her colleagues, including the chairman of the coalition party SNS Andrej Danko, has repeatedly criticized public broadcaster for bias, unprofessionalism, activism in favor of their political opponents, and strong criticism against them. One of the publicly stated reasons for abolishing RTVS is the allegedly untrustworthy news coverage. However, this claim is not supported by facts—publicly available data or the responses of some journalists in this research who argued against it.

“We know many of these statements, and the parliamentary debate showed that people feel something is missing on RTVS. 'Our voters feel that...' for me, those are not exact data. Exact data show the objectivity of RTVS.” (Jana Krescanko Dibáková)

The political motivation behind the decision to abolish RTVS and replace it with STVR is also indicated by other announced changes. Government coalition politicians had been hinting for weeks and months before the abolition of the institution about the personnel changes they wanted to see in the new institution. Among the journalists they wanted to replace was Marta Jančkárová, who was still a journalist at the existing RTVS at the time of the interview.

“The coalition plans changes in RTVS and publicly announces which journalists will have to leave. I and my colleague Marek Makara (from the political discussion program 5 Minutes to 12) were mentioned by the chairman of the NR SR Committee for Culture and Media, Roman Michelko, at a meeting with Infovojna fans (*note: a disinformation portal*) (indicating that our departure would be a significant bonus of the new law), and Michal Havran (*note: RTVS moderator*) was mentioned by the Secretary General of the Ministry of Culture, Lukáš Machala. The future director and head of news will be crucial for journalists at RTVS. In an atmosphere where politicians are pre-emptively stating which journalists should no longer be in the television, it is hard to believe that this is an effort to achieve quality broadcasting without political pressures.” (Marta Jančkárová)

A public medium in a liberal democracy serves the public interest. If there are attempts to politically control such a medium to influence its content and interfere with journalistic production, it is a sign of illiberal politics and possible autocratic motives, as discussed in the literature review. In Slovakia’s case, this characterization would apply not only to Minister Šimkovičová, who proposed the law, but also to the parliament, government, and president, through whom the bill was passed and accepted.

### **3.2.2 Private Televisions**

Private televisions in Slovakia are also experiencing political pressures with political goals during the fourth government of Fico. The case of Jana Krescanko Dibáková and her decision to leave TV JOJ after 22 years is briefly discussed in literature review. During the interview she talked about the issues of finding guests out of coalition politicians, who decided to ‘block’ the debate and not come at all, making the production impossible.

“I tried for weeks; we broadcasted with significant problems, then there were several breaks, and I decided to leave TV JOJ with a clean slate, without anyone making dramaturgical interventions in the show.” (Jana Krescanko Dibáková)

The show ended with Dibáková's departure from TV JOJ, and the television decided not to fill the position. Dibáková's departure was also due to two other reasons. The second was the period before the 2024 presidential elections when she was eliminated from pre-election broadcasts despite being a prominent political moderator for TV JOJ, and the management replaced her with younger colleagues, seemingly to appease government politicians. The third reason was a change in news coverage that occurred shortly before the 2023 parliamentary elections, with which she could not agree. In the interview, she stated that it was undoubtedly due to political pressures and reasons for the changes.

“We see that the Slovak oligarchy, which owns the media, is directly connected to various significant state contracts, making some steps quite readable for me.” (Jana Krescanko Dibáková)

Richard Dírer, a long-time moderator and one of the political-news faces of TA3 television, left the television only 10 days before the interview for this research. According to him, his departure was also due to political pressures, although he did not experience them directly. He was long the target of attacks by several government politicians, but that was not the reason he left the television. TA3 is a news channel, and Dírer said he did not feel political pressures in his show *In Politics*, but he felt them from the director of news and public affairs, who is also the wife of an advisor to the government political party Hlas, which he believed she could not separate from her work.

Besides being a moderator, Dírer was also the chief dramaturge, responsible for the entire broadcast flow, determining what airs when, scheduling interviews, live press conferences, etc. He was removed from this position at the end of February 2024, or it was eventually agreed upon, because he no longer had the capacity to fight something, which was unwinnable.

“The opinions between me as chief dramaturge and the director of news completely diverged on what is essential, why it is important to have critical news coverage, why it is crucial to approach everyone equally. What started to bother me extremely was the relativization of topics. ... 'Those opposition protests no longer interest anyone, they happen every week, let's not broadcast them live anymore.' Or 'Let's not cover them from six locations, let's do it only from Bratislava. Let's make it short, not three minutes, a minute will do. Why are you still covering the amendment to the Criminal Code? Everything has already been said. Why are you still poking around in Andrej Danko's car accident? The police haven't released anything yet.' This kind of relativization.” (Richard Dírer)

Unlike his journalistic colleagues who participated in this research, Dírer said that the parliamentary elections in 2023 did not change anything for his work, and the real change and pressures began only in February, bringing increasing nervousness about the presidential elections. The ruling coalition's candidate for the 2024 presidential elections was then chairman of the ruling Hlas party, Peter Pellegrini. According to Dírer, the coalition started to fear that Pellegrini was not guaranteed to win, causing panic within the TA3 news director, leading to pressures.

At TV Markíza, pressures and battles over the nature of news coverage are ongoing. A significant number of journalists mentioned the situation of Michal Kovačič and the show *Na telo*, which Markíza's management canceled despite it being the most-watched political discussion in Slovakia for a long time. According to some journalists in this research, the future of Markíza and its journalistic freedom will be even more crucial for the level of the Slovak media environment and democracy than the public broadcaster, due to its specific and strong position gained over years of producing quality news. The weakening of Markíza, the removal of successful shows, and critical journalists worry the journalists. According to the journalists who participated in this research, political pressures in private televisions aim at the same goal

as changes in the public media—to control the medium, influence news coverage, reduce or stop criticism, and use the medium for self-promotion or propaganda. This phenomenon contradicts liberal democracy and shows that politicians participating in such campaigns do not care about liberal democracy. Televisions are crucial for the government in terms of media control and information dissemination because they reach a broader audience that follows only a limited number of media, leading to better information dissemination.

“The difference from Denník N, Denník SME, and Aktuality is that our influence does not lie in having our articles read by Smer, SNS, or Hlas voters. But when we come up with a revelation, whether it’s a corruption scandal or that Pellegrini flew on a private jet to a meeting, it reaches people who do not read us but may vote for the ruling coalition. Because those televisions will play it. And they need to castrate those televisions, demotivate them from covering such topics. I see it as an effort to cut off their voters from receiving critical information about their activities. I see it as part of an effort to entrench themselves.”

(Vladimír Šnidl)

Throughout this process, it is evident that politicians do not hide their steps and intentions, openly admitting their reasons and actions. Journalists mentioned several examples of this, for instance when Erik Kaliňák boasted at a Smer meeting about delivering results to people, listing journalists who had recently left or were about to leave television—Dibáková, Iliev, Dírer, Kovačič, Makara, and Jančkárová. Based on these statements, journalists consider the politicians' motivations clear—they aim to influence news coverage, manipulate television discussions, and control both public and private media to achieve political goals.

### **3.3 Redirection from classic media to alternative, hoaxers, and the spread of propaganda**

#### **3.3.1 New Legitimacy for Disinformation Portals**

Politicians need the media to effectively disseminate their messages and campaigns to the public. The media, in turn, monitor politicians and hold them accountable, working in the public interest. This is a typical relationship in a liberal democracy. But what happens when politicians reject traditional media? Slovakia experienced new milestones in this regard during 2023 and 2024. During the political campaign before the parliamentary elections in September 2023, several members of the future coalition parties of the fourth Fico's government, specifically Smer and SNS, gave interviews to disinformation channels and at the same time began ignoring invitations to political discussions of critical media. According to most journalists in this research, the situation worsened after the 2023 parliamentary elections. A broader group of politicians stopped accepting invitations to critical political discussions, most government politicians stopped answering questions from four major opinion-forming media outlets (Denník N, Denník SME, Aktuality.sk, TV Markíza), and they began cooperating more with representatives of the disinfo scene.

“They know how to reach voters via the internet without the risk of criticism, and thus they push the boundaries by saying, 'We won't respond to this or that media,'” (Martina Töröková)

During Fico's fourth government, politicians are building their own media by legitimizing disinformation channels, disinformation sources, and the people who create such content. Among them is Daniel Bombic, a convicted disinformant and anti-Semite with several international arrest warrants. This behavior was unprecedented; before, there had been a clear line that politicians had not crossed, even if such people produced content in their favor. Today, Fico and even ministers give interviews to people like Bombic and Mimi Šramová, who are not real journalists but pose with a microphone and do not ask critical questions, instead, they are for example praising the looks of a government politician, which has nothing to do with critical journalism.



“They prefer non-journalists. They call them alternative media. First, I do not consider them an alternative, and second, I do not consider them media. But the fact that politicians systematically bypass serious media and try to diminish their influence and credibility is happening, and it happens by using their social networks or even going to various hoaxers, conspiracists, and extremists.” (Matúš Kostolný)

Politicians divert attention from legitimate media, aiming to undermine their credibility and legitimacy in the public's eyes. As a result, a significant portion of the public, according to some journalists, turns away from traditional media, which politicians portray as enemies of society and Slovakia. Most journalists in this research believe that politicians aim to spread whatever serves their political goals by diverting public attention from traditional critical media, which again deviates from the typical legitimacy of the politician - journalist/media relationship.

“I also think they have other reasons for attacking and wanting to control TV Markíza and public television. Simply because they want to flood the space with themselves. They really don't want any competition.” (Martin M. Šimečka)

Politicians try to erase the line between traditional media (which work with credible sources, facts, verify facts, use editors, and adhere to an ethical code) and any source of information, which can be a blog, YouTube channel, or a website called "news" but has nothing to do with traditional media. Jana Krescanko Dibáková used an analogy in the interview, comparing the politicians' efforts to equate journalists with disinfo portals to equating doctors with charlatans, which she believes causes enormous damage and puts Slovak journalism in a directly threatening state.

Tabloid media have a specific position that is also being reinforced during Fico's fourth government.

"All tabloid media already belong to Penta (*note: investment group*), and Penta is not the ideal - and that is an euphemism, the ideal owner. Penta really uses its media to improve its power position or business position. So, we can't rely on that group of media to be able to support the democratic understanding of press freedom." (Beata Balogová)

Journalists agreed that government politicians are systematically trying to weaken traditional critical media while simultaneously strengthening conspiracy theories and disinformation portals. Most journalists expressed concern or conviction that politicians from Fico's government do this tendentiously, systematically, and aim to weaken the spread of truthful information in favor of their own propaganda.

### **3.4 Impacts on the Journalist's Work and the Journalistic Community**

#### **3.4.1 Copycat Attacks from Citizens**

Attacks on journalists serve several functions for politicians, one of which is very direct—communicating to the public that there is something wrong with that particular journalist or media outlet. When they do this repeatedly and systematically, they manage to label the media, and these labels are later adopted by citizens. All journalists involved in this research agreed that part of citizens mimic the attacks they receive from politicians. In practice, this means that if a politician verbally attacks a journalist, for example, at a press conference or makes a video about them on Facebook, citizens adopt the rhetoric used by the politician and start expressing themselves similarly.

"There is a clear connection. My Messenger or Instagram is always full of hate when politicians share or say something about me, of course." (Peter Bárdy)

Investigative journalist Karin Kőváry Sólymos pointed out in the interview that this behavior can also be tracked based on the analyses they conduct at ICJK.

"When we do those analyses, it's clear that when I go through the comments, most of it is really copy-pasting, that people really copy the same arguments, the same statements that politicians suggest to them in their own videos, where they just come, do a standup, say what they want, and don't get any critical questions." (Karin Kőváry Sólymos)

Journalists who have personally experienced attacks from government politicians (11 out of 14 involved) also have experience with various forms of attacks from citizens who mimicked the politicians' rhetoric. These attacks are not always just on social media but also spill over into real life. Mária Benedikovičová described an incident that happened just a few days before the interview.

"I was at the dentist, waiting in the waiting room to be called in. An older man came in, probably in his seventies. He looked at me and asked if I was from Denník N, it was clear he recognized me, and he told me that 'you have blood on your hands.' It's evident that he was using the language of Tomáš Taraba, who wrote on Facebook a few days earlier after the attempted assassination that 'the media have bloody hands.' I think that was the quote. So it's noticeable that people adopt the politicians' language." (Mária Benedikovičová)

This was not an isolated incident. In recent months, she has experienced an increase in such incidents. She also described a situation where she was walking down the street with her young son and citizens started shouting at her that she was writing nonsense. These situations did not happen during previous governments, even though she was an active journalist who uncovered several big scandals. In this regard, she believes the situation has changed and worsened during Fico's fourth government.

Similar situations happen to other journalists involved in this research. Matúš Kostolný experienced, for the first time a week before the interview, someone stopping him on the street, shouting at him, and insulting him. Martina Töröková received written threats from citizens via

social media after being attacked by Environment Minister Tomáš Taraba (SNS). She also received threats from hunters and had to increase her vigilance, along with her husband (who is not a journalist), impacting her personal life. Martin M. Šimečka recently began receiving envelopes in his mailbox at home containing insults and threats. He believes this is intended to show him that people know where he lives. He mentioned that he remembers such practices from the communist era. He is more concerned about politicians provoking people prone to violence through such attacks on journalists (such as criminal complaints by Smer MPs, which he is facing), stirring up passion and hatred against journalists. He believes it is a thin line leading to physical attacks, even shootings. Some of the other journalists involved in this research agree with this.

Journalists agree that citizens feel legitimized to attack based on political statements. According to Beata Balogová, citizens may feel they have a license from the government to attack, as government politicians portray journalists as anti-government and anti-national and suggest they need to be eliminated. According to Kőváry Sóllymos, this increases the likelihood that someone might take justice into their own hands, which could have fatal consequences.

"After I was attacked by State Secretary Filip Kuffa, his friend, a publicly known and followed speleologist, also repeatedly attacked me publicly, using vulgarities and lies. When politicians, who are in the public eye and somehow represent a behavior model, do this, their supporters can more easily follow suit." (Soňa Mäkká)

All journalists agreed that it is not just about copying the language and spreading attacks but that there is a direct influence of political statements on the intensity and frequency of attacks by the public. Jana Krescanko Dibáková mentioned several instances where she faced attacks from citizens after being attacked by a government politician, including being shouted at on the street.

### 3.4.2 Impact on Journalists' Behavior While Performing Their Profession

One possible effect of continuous and systematic attacks on journalists is self-censorship. This can take various forms, one of which is omitting certain information and not publishing it because the journalist fears the consequences. None of the journalists interviewed had experienced this personally, but several admitted that they could not speak for their colleagues, and given the increasingly intense situation, it is possible that something similar might have happened.

"It's harassing, and the point at which it becomes self-censorship is hard to find, hard to observe objectively. ... Journalists today avoid certain topics not because they are afraid but because they know the media management will have a problem with it." (Jana Krescanko Dibáková)

A stronger level of self-censorship could be a journalist completely stopping their work. Several journalists involved in this research admitted that they had recently considered such thoughts, citing reasons such as questioning their strength to continue or reassessing whether it would be safer for their personal safety to pursue a different type of journalism (not writing about politics).

"I am internally struggling with this myself; it's not pleasant to have to overcome fear to continue." (Mária Benedikovičová)

Another challenge that many journalists have felt in recent months is maintaining objectivity and not getting drawn into the metaphorical "fight" that politicians are trying to instigate. As described in the second part of the research results, despite being labeled by politicians as enemies and anti-Slovak, none of the journalists feel this way, nor do they see themselves as enemies of the government. Nevertheless, many of them admitted that it is challenging to

operate in an environment where the other side is constantly attacking you and creating campaigns against you.

“We try not to get involved in these disputes. We are here to monitor the government and politicians, both opposition and coalition.” (Matej Príbelský)

Journalists repeatedly described how uncomfortable it is and that this government behavior puts them under constant pressure, even in newsrooms where the government and its members do not have direct political influence.

As a result of the above-mentioned impacts, it has become clear from the interviews with journalists that journalistic work is more challenging than before. According to some journalists, beyond ordinary professional expectations, the work requires more self-denial, involves greater risks than in the past, and is a more significant psychological burden.

### **3.4.3 Personal Life of Journalists**

Based on the interviews, attacks by government politicians during Robert Fico's fourth government are more aggressive and systematic, affecting not only journalists' professional lives but also their personal lives. This is due to the increasing intensity and particularly personal nature of the attacks in recent months. Several journalists involved in the research spoke about the impact of these attacks on their families and the potential personal safety of themselves and their loved ones. Many of them also mentioned receiving threats, including threats of harm to themselves and their families, including their young children. Journalists also find it distressing when they worry that their loved ones might read these attacks, which could upset them. Some journalists admitted that family members who do not use the internet learned about the attacks as well.

"Your relatives read it, your mother, your husband, your mother-in-law, and so on. You worry that your children will read it online, which is the real pressure that leads to what can be described as almost mafioso behavior by some government officials." (Jana Krescanko Dibáková)

Attacks can also affect a journalist's personal identity. Matej Príbelský explained that when a journalist works for Aktuality, they automatically get labeled as a liberal, even if they do not define themselves that way. This phenomenon occurs in all critical media that government politicians label. Another impact on personal life is the increased caution that many journalists have felt recently. Because they or their colleagues are frequent targets of attacks, many have adjusted their behavior in their physical and online lives. This includes limiting personal posts on social media or avoiding using public transport in the city and preferring to use a private car.

#### **3.4.4 Insufficient Protection**

Journalists work in the public interest and when they become targets of attacks, they need protection. Interviews for this research indicate that journalists have experienced ineffective work by the police and prosecutors. For example, Lukáš Diko mentioned a case where he faced a significant threat, which was sent to police and subsequently to the prosecutor office. Even after two years, he still does not know the outcome of this process. Mária Benedikovičová reported that she is not aware of any case, where she nor her colleagues, who faced attacks, managed to hold any attackers accountable.

Several journalists shared negative experiences with investigations. A common issue is that reporting a problem to the police is unpleasant because the statement has to be dictated and transcribed, making the whole process unnecessarily long and potentially retraumatizing. According to most journalists, such cases discourage their colleagues from reporting attacks.

From the journalists' statements, it is clear that police officers are not adequately prepared for such incidents. They often do not know how to handle the situation effectively and sometimes lack context about the attacks, which complicates further investigation.

Some journalists noted that not all experiences with the police were negative. For example, Marta Jančkárová praised the police work when she was assigned police protection due to threats stemming from attacks by MP Luboš Blaha and subsequent attacks from citizens. However, overall, journalists rate the protection as ineffective and not at all helpful enough.

In their responses, journalists frequently mentioned that the state does not seem capable of providing protection, and they consider the legal and institutional protection insufficient, especially in times when politicians are making them targets.

A common phenomenon that journalists experience is the trivialization of hate speech and threats. This happens even from actors who should be addressing the problem according to their agendas, such as police officers and politicians overseeing relevant departments. Some journalists emphasized that the experience of dealing with attacks often depends on the individual police officer or prosecutor handling the case. This is part of a larger problem identified by several journalists: the lack of a systematic approach to protecting journalists.

“As for the protection of journalists, I see the issue, especially since I now know about the project from the Netherlands, which inspired Safe Journalism. It shows how things could actually work and how they don't work at all here. I see it quite critically that a civic association or a medium has to substitute the state in such matters, even though it is clear that an NGO will never have the same powers, opportunities, or resources as the state.”

(Karin Kőváry Sóllymos)

### **3.4.5 New Generations of Journalists**



During the interviews with journalists, I was interested in whether the increased number of attacks and the more tense situation might impact the number of young people deciding to become journalists, thereby affecting the number of quality applicants for media jobs. Most journalists did not have specific numbers, but most acknowledged that it is a possible impact that can be already happening or we can expect to see in the near future.

“In discussions with several editors-in-chief, we repeatedly agreed that there is a significant threat that there will be fewer new journalists because they might reconsider due to these attacks and the murder of Ján Kuciak, among other aspects of journalistic work.” (Lukáš Diko)

Beata Balogová from Denník SME does not see such impacts, which she attributes to market shifts. Denník SME is known as a ‘lifeboat’ for journalists who must leave other media for example due to pressures. Jana Krescanko Dibáková recalled starting as a journalist more than 20 years ago when she was told: “20 people are waiting for your job.” Today, that is no longer the case, according to her.

“I think it will certainly have an impact because it is not pleasant. ... Now it is even worse because we see that at press conferences, they publicly humiliate people and publicly attack you.” (Karin Kőváry Sólymos)

Several interviewees noted that it is challenging to find people who want to pursue journalism and are also skilled enough. This is a widespread problem discussed with colleagues within their own editorial offices and other media. Marta Jančkárová, a moderator at the public broadcaster RTVS at the time of the interview, said it is to be expected that during attacks on RTVS, there would be little interest in working for the broadcaster and that she anticipates more colleagues will leave—some have already left recently. Martina Töröková occasionally

interacts with journalism students, many of whom grapple with the dilemma of whether to become journalists and if they have the strength and desire to do so in this environment.

“Coincidentally, we are currently looking for journalists, and it is much harder than it used to be. Even young journalists we collaborate with often say something I didn't hear before: 'I want to work in newspapers, I want to work in journalism, but I don't want to do politics.'”  
(Matúš Kostolný)

The issue brought by Kostolný is quite essential and if this kind of experience becomes more frequent in other newsrooms, Slovak journalism may have a problem with not enough people covering topics fundamental for reporting and therefore not fulfilling the essential task of journalism - covering news and serving the role of watchdog.

### **3.4.6 Measures from Editorial Offices for Journalists**

Continuous and systematic attacks have led to increased security measures in editorial offices, which all journalists in this research have observed during the fourth government of Robert Fico. Most of them mentioned the need to introduce new measures during the time of parliamentary elections in 2023 when the situation significantly worsened due to the ongoing campaign against journalists, which became a political issue. Since then, they have also noticed additional measures.

“We have a permanent program where people who are targets of attacks report it through ICJK or handle it with me, and we address it directly with lawyers. They can even get psychological help and consultation. These are things we handle as they occur. There are definitely more cases during the last government; previously, it was more case-by-case, but now we have some things permanently in place because we can't keep turning them on and off; we would have to restart every day.” (Peter Bárdy)

Journalists mentioned news measures such as increased security for the editorial building, providing security training for journalists, and in some cases, the option of psychological support. Matúš Kostolný also mentioned considering the need for security at public events such as public debates, due to harassment of journalists by figures like MP Erik Kaliňák and his colleagues. Peter Bárdy and commentator Marian Leško have experienced this in recent months. Some journalists said they have strengthened security measures but remain flexible and prepared to introduce additional measures if necessary.

### **3.5 Democracy - Autocracy**

#### **3.5.1 Attempts to Restrict Free Media**

All journalists interviewed for this research expressed some level of concern about the freedom of the press in Slovakia and the development of the situation in the near future. This concern arises not only from the attacks they, their colleagues, and their editorial offices experience but also from the systematic approach of Robert Fico's fourth government towards the media. Journalists see these attacks as part of a broader systematic effort to combat the media, which manifests in various forms and levels.

The state holds a monopoly on justice, and the government can create laws it deems important. Journalists described several legislative attempts by the government to influence their work or restrict free media. Several journalists critically mentioned an amendment that aims to strengthen politicians' right to reply in the media. According to the journalists, this is merely a pretext to make media work more difficult because the current legislation already allows anyone to enforce corrections if incorrect information is published. They fear that the new measure, which strengthens politicians' rights, is an infringement on press freedom.

Another discussed legislative change mentioned by journalists is the restriction of access to information. Many journalists use tools such as the online cadastre in their work, which the government plans to charge, thereby making the work of journalists more difficult by limiting their abilities to investigate.

Some journalists noted that the government wants to make the work of critical traditional media more difficult through legislative proposals. When disinformation portals and alternative blogs share false information, it does not bother government politicians because these sources act as propaganda for the government and do not engage in serious journalism.

In the case of public broadcaster, according to journalists, the government's aim is to control the news as discussed in the third part of this research's findings. Most journalists expressed the belief that the government wants to turn the public broadcaster into a state media outlet through which they can disseminate messages aligned with their political goals. According to journalists, this is not only about restricting media freedom but also about misusing public resources.

*“[In the case of RTVS], it is clear that they are targeting the news. It's a completely misguided understanding of public broadcasting. They see it as a state television, denying that journalists have any watchdog role. They believe journalists shouldn't monitor the government—they say.”* (Beata Balogová)

*“I see the government's effort to restrict media freedom as much as possible. That's their goal. From the proposed right to reply law, to plans to charge for access to information under the Freedom of Information Act, to the RTVS law. Everything has just one aim—to effectively limit freedom of expression.”* (Martin M. Šimečka)

Several journalists repeatedly stated that politicians are doing this intentionally and are not hiding their motivation. They want the public broadcaster to serve them, and for other media

to stop reporting critically about them, or else they will be sanctioned in some way. In this case, online media such as Denník N, Denník SME, and Aktuality, which conduct critical journalism and are not dependent on state advertising, have more power. Conversely, the government more effectively tries to influence news production in private television stations like TV Markíza, TV JOJ, and TA3.

Media freedom is one of the main pillars of democracy. Without information based on facts, citizens cannot make free decisions and may easily fall into believing propaganda and hoaxes. Based on journalists' testimonies, there is a suspicion that this is precisely the goal of Robert Fico's fourth government.

### **3.5.2 Friend and role model Orbán**

During the preparation for interviews with journalists, it was clear to me that I wanted to ask them about their perception of Viktor Orbán's relationship with the media and the situation in Hungary, Slovakia's southern neighbor. In a significant number of interviews, journalists independently began to talk about the similarity of the situation facing Slovak media to that in Hungary, comparing Robert Fico's and his government's attempts to Viktor Orbán. The vast majority of journalists involved in this research believe that Fico's fourth government acts with similar goals to Orbán's, with some thinking the situation for the media in Slovakia is even more aggressive, while others believe the Slovak media scene is still stronger but could be heading towards what Orbán achieved in Hungary.

According to most journalists, Viktor Orbán has long been Robert Fico's role model. Beata Balogová mentioned that Hungary's main export product is its media culture, and Fico's government receives significant help from Orbán's government, not just in terms of inspiration but also in consultations. The changes Fico and his government are implementing, inspired by the Hungarian example, are seen as alarming.

“Viktor Orbán is a direct role model for Robert Fico. This is not just my evaluative judgment, but Fico himself has repeatedly said that Viktor Orbán is his role model and that he would make many of the same moves as Orbán, and indeed, he is making those moves. The only difference is that what took Viktor Orbán a longer time to achieve, Robert Fico's fourth government wants to accomplish within a single year.” (Jana Krescanko Dibáková)

Most journalists think that Fico wants to replicate Orbán's success in Hungary, but within a much shorter time frame. Some believe he is succeeding, while others think Slovakia is not yet there but might be heading in that direction. Orbán proceeded gradually and used different methods at different times, but the motive, goal, and impacts are considered similar.

Some journalists believe that the situation in Slovakia is even more aggressive towards the media than in Hungary, arguing that such brutal and vulgar attacks on journalists do not come directly from Hungarian government politicians but from propagandist media. In comparison, Slovak government politicians attack journalists almost daily. The intention is the same - to minimize criticism and force the media to spread only what aligns with political goals.

“Whenever I meet colleagues from other countries, they are shocked at what we are facing in such a short time. Colleagues in the Czech Republic, but also in Poland and Hungary, which have gone through very tough years, and Hungary still is.” (Matúš Kostolný)

Fico, like Orbán, aims to control critical media and spread only government propaganda. For media he cannot control or expects will be harder to influence, he wants to divert attention. This is done by controlling public broadcasting and labeling other media, such as Denník N, Denník SME, Aktuality, and TV Markíza, as enemy media, anti-Slovak, while attacking specific journalists from these media themselves. Online platforms play a role in this process. Politicians today can communicate with their voters on their profiles, such as on Facebook or Instagram, where their content is not regulated, allowing them to address voters with lies and

attacks on opponents, including traditional critical media against which they lead a hate campaign. Government politicians want control over how they are reported on and avoid answering uncomfortable questions. Fico's government is ready to attack the media and suppress media freedom in Slovakia, with Orbán serving as an inspiration and Fico himself referring to Orbán as his friend.

According to several journalists, the media in Hungary were less prepared for Viktor Orbán than the media in Slovakia are for Robert Fico. However, since Fico is approaching it more aggressively and in a shorter time, the situation is different. Some journalists also noted a similarity in Fico's relationship with financial groups and oligarchs in Slovakia, who help him with his goal to suppress the media.

“Orbán worked on this patiently for years. Fico never took it seriously because, as I said, he always managed to win elections even without media support. He only needed Facebook and alternative, conspiracy media. But he learned from Orbán that if he wants to stay in power for a long time, he will have to go further and control at least part of the media. And make them obedient. So, the timeline is different from Orbán's; he's doing it very quickly, very brutally. Orbán did it almost imperceptibly.” (Martin M. Šimečka)

Fico acts similarly to Orbán not just because he does not want to hear criticism about himself and his government. Based on the interviews with Slovak journalists, it is a calculated plan designed to help him stay in power longer. This may be a part of a broader strategy to undermine democracy and freedom of the press in Slovakia, later discussed in conceptualization of this thesis.

### **3.5.3 Systematic suppression by the government as a political agenda**

In interviews with journalists, a recurring belief emerged that the attacks on journalists, which have become more aggressive and frequent under Robert Fico's fourth government, are part of

a systematic approach. The vast majority of journalists involved in this research are convinced that the media have become part of the political struggle for politicians. Politicians talk about the departure of long-time journalists from the media as their successes, and their voters like it because politicians have long and increasingly intensely told them that these journalists are enemies. Government politicians also consider them enemies—they no longer see the normal role of journalists in a liberal democracy (i.e., to hold state power accountable), and they view any criticism as an enemy act that harms them and must be punished. According to journalists, the current government is making individual attacks on journalists and legislative measures as a part of their agenda. Peter Bárdy divides it into two periods: the period before 2018, when politicians would invent something to cover up an issue, and the period from 2020 onward, particularly for the Smer and SNS parties, where it became an agenda item to weaken, discredit, or completely eliminate critical media. Other journalists share more or less a similar view.

“The current government is doing this as part of their agenda. There's no doubt about it. It's not that they can't defend against it and it just happens by chance. From day one, systematically, not all members of the government, but the Prime Minister and his closest collaborators have it as part of their agenda.” (Matúš Kostolný)

Journalists perceive the negative impacts of this behavior as an attack on the pillars of democracy, weakening democracy in their eyes. Some talk about attempts to lean towards authoritarian non-democratic regimes. An argument supporting the claim that this is a systematic attack on the media is that, according to journalists, it is not just a by-product of Fico's government. According to Beata Balogová, it is part of an autocratic playbook. Attacks on the media are something every autocrat must check off. The attacks are targeted because they serve a higher goal for politicians—to stay in power. Part of this goal is to spread an atmosphere of fear, which journalists see as a result of the attacks—both personal and broader. This is again part of systematic planning. Another aspect is strengthening the misunderstanding



of the role and legitimacy of the media in a liberal democracy. According to journalists, some politicians do not understand the role of the media and view any criticism as a personal attack, which they consider unfair and want to respond to—either with real personal attacks or other tactics described in this research. Some politicians approach it pragmatically. Informed citizens who can think critically and evaluate facts will not easily believe the propaganda and lies that government politicians want to spread. This element is present to some extent in democracy but has its limitations. Most journalists in this research believe that their Slovak government politicians have lost these boundaries.

“The impact of attacks on the journalistic community and media credibility is definitely noticeable. Robert Fico has been systematically working on discrediting media that hold a mirror of criticism to him and have high viewership in the country for about 14 years. This strategy can be seen as a long-term effort to prepare his electorate to perceive negative news about him as irrelevant regardless of the arguments presented.” (Martina Töröková)

Part of this systematic attack on the media involves the government's attempt to distort what objectivity means. Journalists pointed out in interviews that politicians in Robert Fico's fourth government envision media objectivity as, for example, inviting one doctor and one anti-vaxxer without medical or scientific education to a discussion, or inviting a Holocaust survivor and a Nazi to the same discussion. Such an image and expectations were also created by the Slovak Minister of Culture, Martina Šimkovičová, when she criticized RTVS for lack of objectivity. However, journalists strongly claim these expectations have nothing to do with an objective media in a democratic society, and applying these expectations will have devastating consequences.

According to some journalists, another aspect of misunderstanding the media is the desire for the media to be just their partners who only reproduce what they say. But critical media do not

work that way, and journalists insist on doing their job honestly—which includes holding political power accountable and being critical if necessary. This obligation applies to the entire political spectrum, not just government politicians.

As mentioned in the first part of this research, journalists have long experience with attempts to influence the media or attack their work. The situation under Robert Fico's fourth government is different in how well-thought-out and aggressive the approach is.

“Politicians are trying. They really want to redefine journalism; they are instilling in their voters' minds that journalists are not here to hold power accountable, which is a fundamental problem.” (Beata Balogová)

The behavior and actions of Robert Fico's government have a direct impact on the behavior of a significant portion of citizens. As explained above, citizens often copy attacks on journalists, doing so repeatedly and intensely. However, citizens also copy the government's thinking about the media and their role—some citizens, according to journalists, do not want to read criticism of their favorite politicians and consider it anti-Slovak activity, which journalists also feel in the attacks they experience from citizens. This process has a broader impact on democracy, bringing it closer to autocracy.

“And as my critics like to remind me, I used to occasionally defend Fico's government, saying that the criticism of the government was being exaggerated in the past. Because I perceived that Fico's government in the past respected democratic rules to some extent. Yes, it had authoritarian tendencies, it was corrupt, all that. But it maintained the basic attributes of democracy, including freedom of the press, despite the language Fico used. Even then, I didn't consider the government directly an enemy of democracy. ... Now there has been a fundamental change in that this government is, in my eyes, an enemy of democracy, or at least a threat to democracy. Its goal is to at least limit democracy, if not destroy it. If it were in their power, they would gladly destroy it. They can't do it only

because we are in the European Union and to some extent, they fear public reaction. But if it were up to them, they would do it. They are limited by external factors. But they themselves now consider democracy an obstacle to their rule.” (Martin M. Šimečka)

Another argument supporting the narrative of systematic attacks on Slovak media by Robert Fico's government is the formalization and officialization of the fight against the media, as discussed in the literature review. During the interviews, journalists pointed out to the fact that in the past, there were individual attacks or phrases that politicians used, however, during the fourth government of Fico, it is more thought through and ‘systematic’.

### **3.5.4 The Role of Institutions**

Several journalists mentioned the role of the European Union, of which Slovakia is a member, during their interviews. According to some, Slovakia and Robert Fico are a test for the Union. Some journalists believe that the EU has stronger leverage over Fico than over Orbán (due to Slovakia's international standing or reliance on European funds), and thus Slovakia will be and is a significant test for the Union. Other journalists were critical, believing the situation is so serious that they expected greater pressure sooner and feel that the entire agenda of media freedom is underestimated. Beata Balogová blames the European Union for its inability to pressure META and other platforms effectively.

“Even in the Media Freedom Act, despite boasting about the progress they've made, they reduce you to... what they've done for you is give you an exclusive status, making you a VIP client of these platforms who will talk to you more. Which is absolute nonsense because I, as an editor-in-chief, don't know whom to call if I get blocked because some Nazi reports me.” (Beata Balogová)

Many journalists are convinced that attacks on the media and journalists will not stop and could potentially worsen if the EU does not intervene.

“They won't stop until the European Union or some real obstacle stops them, such as making the law unenforceable. Or they will simply be unable to implement it.” (Martin M. Šimečka)

### **3.5.5 Platforms and Social Media**

Platforms, particularly Facebook by META, but also Instagram and YouTube, play a significant role in disseminating information today. They are used by both journalists and politicians. However, journalists in this research agree that politicians from Fico's government want to use these platforms as their primary means of communication, providing information to citizens "directly"—but in practice, this means without fact-checking and often with attacks on journalists.

“What is very crucial is that we need to return to the situation where politicians communicate key information intended for the public not just through their own videos on social media, but through briefings, press conferences, and answering journalists' questions.” (Jana Krescanko Dibáková)

Most journalists in this research agreed that they observe how algorithms boost emotional posts, especially those with negative tones, during their work. Conversely, their ability to effectively disseminate their articles, reports, and analyses is declining, with their reach continuously shrinking.

“Facebook’s algorithm is merciless and is set up to make money for shareholders by displaying posts that carry advertisements. And when these posts are most effective—especially those that are hateful, xenophobic, racist, truly hateful—Facebook gives them endless impact and reach.” (Peter Bárdy)

But it's not just a problem with Facebook. On Telegram, politicians and citizens can share any content, including threatening and violent material. This is particularly the case with Ľuboš

Blaha, a member of Smer and newly elected MEP, whose Facebook profile was deleted for repeated community violations due to spreading hateful content. However, Blaha moved to Telegram and can still share his posts, which often attack journalists, on Facebook via the party's profile. Because of cases like this, journalists see Facebook's regulation as insufficient and measures as ineffective in protecting people under attack, including journalists whose work is in the public interest. According to several journalists, politicians are aware of the power of social networks, and many have gained their political positions precisely because they are conspiracy theorists and deniers of facts and truth. Because this approach has paid off for them, they do not want to stop, strengthening the motivation of government politicians to try to weaken or eliminate critical media.

#### **4. CONCEPTUALIZING ATTACKS ON INDEPENDENT MEDIA AND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN SLOVAKIA**

The analysis clearly indicates that the situation regarding the attacks of ruling politicians has shifted with the onset of Robert Fico's fourth government. Now it is time to create a conceptualization, by using the grounded theory, and answer two research questions of this thesis. The main concepts used for this theory are informational autocracy, democratic backsliding, securitization, the fourth estate and the importance of critical media in the sustainment of liberal democracy.

## **4.1 Attacks**

Attacks by politicians experienced by Slovak journalists during Robert Fico's fourth government are much more frequent, harsher, and more personal. The majority of journalists identified the 2023 parliamentary elections as the biggest change, everyone felt it in 2024. 11 out of 14 journalists have experienced personal attacks from government politicians, and all of them feel political attacks or pressures on their media to some extent. Journalists experience verbal attacks, harassment, social media bullying, but also legal threats. Guriev and Treisman (2022) claim that such intimidation is a sign of spin dictators (p. 9-10). These scholars operate in non-liberal democratic conditions and this analysis shows that in the case of Slovakia, illiberal democratic methods are present. Legal mechanisms are used by authoritarians in the modern world to weaken democracy (Varol, 2014, p. 1683-1685) and Slovakia is not resilient to these attempts.

To understand the scope of the problem and where we stand, we need to know the realities; the answers revealed that the attacks are worse. Not only that, the attacks are not just isolated incidents but rather part of a larger hate campaign against the media, which became a political agenda during the fourth government of Robert Fico, with high-ranking politicians explicitly talking about a 'fight' that journalists say is one-sided and that they do not agree with. Violation of rights of free media is a sign of an illiberal government (Ronen, 2022, p. 15) and Slovak journalists feel threatened.

## **4.2 Strategy**

Buzan et al. (1998) defined securitization as 'when a securitizing actor uses a rhetoric of existential threat and thereby takes an issue out of what under those conditions is "normal

politics,” we have a case of securitization’ (p. 24). Claiming that media in Slovakia became a security issue per se is a hard task - there is no evidence that critical journalists or newsrooms threaten Slovakia, in any way, in domestic affairs, nor as an international actor. It seems almost ridiculous to phrase it like this, when the reality is quite the opposite - they work in the public interest as part of a system of checks and balances (Powers, 2010, p. 257), as ‘watch dogs’, as many of my respondents called themselves. However, Slovak journalists during the fourth government of Robert Fico experience a continuous campaign of attacks from politicians. These are not isolated incidents. Journalists and media are being labeled as enemies, attacked during press conferences, on social media, and not only is the content of the media being attacked, but the journalists themselves are personally targeted. These attacks often extend beyond their professional work into their personal lives. Politicians justify this by promoting a narrative they have fabricated about the media – that they are anti-Slovak, enemies, and that the media needs new strict rules. Wæver (1995) argues that created urgency about the issue or perceived threat as possibly undermining sovereignty, may be utilized by a state power as a reason to use exceptional methods (p. 48). This approach suggests that any sector could become the primary focus for concerns regarding threats, vulnerabilities, and need for defense (which may take various types of forms) at any given moment. Again, Slovak independent critical media are one of the pillars of the country’s democracy, however, Fico and his government are targeting them as “enemies” and falsely creating the perception of security issues in order to justify the inadequate measures - continuous attacks on journalists and media, denial of accreditation for selected media, but also legislative changes such as cancelation of public RTVS and establishment of new STVR, with the only motive - to gain control over news and general management, but also political pressures in private televisions.

Wæver (1995) claims that rulers, in order to gain control over an issue of their interest, can always attempt to use the tool of securitization of the issue (p. 50-51). Fico aims to do the same with the media in Slovakia, with allies as Ľuboš Blaha, Erik Kaliňák (Smer), Tomáš Taraba, Andrej Danko, Martina Šimkovičová (SNS) or Matúš Šutaj Eštok (Hlas). This is important, because it is a clear signal - media are being labeled as enemies, as anti-Slovak, almost on a daily basis and not just by low-ranked politicians, but by the highest officials they have - MPs, ministers, and the prime minister himself. They want people and their voters to feel the urgency to act and fight; they believe that critical media are 'in fact' enemies, which they need to get rid off.

One of the reasons, crucial one of course, is the basic nature of journalism, which Fico and his colleagues do not want to suffer. They do not want to be accountable and being accountable is something which strengthens democracy (Schauseil et al., 2019, p. 2-3), thus this process is weakened by continuous attacks on the media - we will get to this in a moment.

A government seeking to maintain its power and avoid being replaced by the opposition must take effective measures, one of which is controlling the media. Luo and Przeworski (2021) refer to such politicians as "authoritarian-minded leaders," (p. 6). Autocracies, which are less transparent, do not provide enough information about the economic performance, therefore they face less protests and resistance (Hollyer et al., 2018). This is both a strategy and a goal of Fico and his government. It is not necessary to prove that Slovakia has become autocratic (which would not be accurate), however this principle is transferable to democracies as well. Journalists themselves believe that attacks on media are supposed to negatively affect freedom of press.



For dictators in the 20th century, censorship was almost as important as ammunition. Spin dictators of modern times work differently. They do not want the citizens, who live in a society which they believe to be well informed even if it's not, to realize the censorship is present (Guriev & Treisman, 2022, p. 88). That is the case of numerous measures, attacks as such are just part of strategy. Free media are threatened by legal mechanisms as well. New law regarding public broadcasters represents a legal mechanism in order to monopolize power (Varol, 2014, p. 1740), suppress media freedom and have a direct channel of ruling parties to spread their propaganda. Analysis showed that all interviewed journalists fear or believe that this change is done with the goal to get control over the content of the news. Other, private televisions, experience political pressures internally as well, TV Markíza is on top of that continuously called 'the enemy' and its reporters have restricted access to information. At the same time, the government politicians create a cooperation with what they call 'alternative media', however journalists do not agree that these portals should be called media. They are not, disinformation portals do not fact check and Fico together with his colleagues want to answer their question, because they do not really confront them.

Here comes another, maybe the most essential part of their strategy and that is the work with public perception. Guriev and Treisman (2020) by their informational theory of autocracy explain that leaders who are dictators or have dictatorship tendencies, survive because they manage to convince the public that they know what they are doing, that they are competent and they achieve it by censoring independent media or state propaganda (p. 3-7). The fourth government of Robert Fico is trying to do the same and is not satisfied with just one spreader of their propaganda (as are the believed plans for the public broadcaster) but want to have a broader scope with the potential to capture more citizens. That is why Fico, Danko, Šimkovičová and other already during the political campaign before the parliamentary

elections in 2023 started to visit and communicate with these disinformation portals and at the same time refuse invitations to the established political debates and interviews by critical media, which has made the journalistic work essentially harder, as claimed by media professionals who participated in this research.

It has been a simultaneous process. The ruling coalition members started to support and legitimize disinformation portals, inviting their supporters and voters to watch them in these kinds of debates, where they would not be asked critical questions, therefore people would end up being under informed or misinformed. At the same time, the ruling coalition members started to systematically attack critical media, label them as enemies and a threat, taking measures and communicating this more effectively also due to the disinformation channels and their representative, therefore a significant part of the public starts to follow this narrative, which is supported by the analysis in this thesis, but also other data. According to the GLOBSEC Trends 2024 report, only 50% of Slovaks trust the media. 73% believe that their media are rather or completely free, however, analysts point out that this particular number may be interpreted differently than one would assume. The informational environment, affected by political steps and measures which suppress traditional critical media, may lead Slovak consumers to believe, that the disinformation channels, which they call the alternative media, are 'finally free' (GLOBSEC, 2024, p. 81) which may again prove that the strategy of current Slovak political power is working, as they use attacks against journalists as part of their political agenda.

The public has a significant, irreplaceable role in the strategy of the ruling coalition. Not only do they want the public to believe them, that journalists are enemies, that they should not be trusted, that there needs to be measures done against them and that the basal nature of critical

journalisms is anti-national and anti-Slovak. The belief of the public in all this is essential for the political leaders to keep their power, as is in the case of autocrats and spin-dictators. However, they also want the public to participate in the attacks against journalists. Nothing is more potent when used as a weapon than intellect and imagination (Galeotti, 2022, p. 6) and Fico and his colleagues realize that. By using hateful videos, posts, or verbal attacks they legitimize the perception of media being an issue and oftentimes they use individual journalists, who they target very personally and call for the public to take a stand. They want citizens to participate in their hateful campaign against the media as well, so that the damage for critical journalism can be even bigger. The analysis of this thesis shows several critical impacts of these attacks that media professionals need to deal with, including the an increase in attacks from citizens, contemplating leaving their jobs or shifting their focus to different topics, the risk that young and capable individuals will not want to pursue journalism, and the need for security measures to handle the situation where they are directly threatened every day.

Journalists believe all of this is a part or it is a part of systematic hateful campaign against the media with the goal to suppress critical press, limit citizens from true, fact-based information, and spread state propaganda. These are attempts attributed by scholars for example to Viktor Orbán, as well as other non-democratic, but also democratic leaders, for whom the democratic framework is merely a playground for advancing their interests, which are not democratic and threaten the level of democracy.

### **4.3 Goals**

After covering the conceptualization of strategy, we can get to the goals of these attacks during the fourth government of Robert Fico, even though as claimed before, some of them overlap in time.

Chesney and Keats Citron (2019) claim that the absence of shared and generally agreed reality creates a chaos where addressing and tackling global but also national issues results in unnecessary debates about fundamental truths, which are being questioned such as the existence of climate change (p. 1777). In Slovakia in 2024, this discussion has regressed even further to questioning whether the Earth is round or flat, as noted by an individual involved in new public broadcaster legislation, which was also highlighted in the interviews. This illustrates the normalization of such individuals, incompetence, and the mockery of elites, including journalists. For the media, this mechanism again limits their ability to perform their essential goal - to keep the public informed and ruling politicians accountable.

Guriev and Treisman (2022) argue that for the survival of spin dictators it is important not to cancel rebellion, but to erase the desire in public to rebel. This is achievable by the constant attacks on press and persuasion of its 'enemy nature' and lack of legitimacy. Most of the general public is swayed by appearances rather than facts and reality, therefore an authoritarian, spin-dictator leader aims to create illusions (p. 12-13). This leader needs, most of all, to be seen as having good qualities and this perception is more important than whether he or she actually has them (Machiavelli, 1532/2003). Distracting attention from critical journalism and enticing people to trust disinformation channels and propaganda, as happening in Slovakia, strengthens this narrative. A crucial aspect of the theory of informational autocracy is the disparity in political knowledge between what can be perceived as the "informed elite" and the general public. While the elite are aware of the limitations and flaws of an incompetent incumbent, the general public is vulnerable to the ruler's propaganda (Guriev & Treisman, 2019, p. 101.) Why is it important to Fico and his colleagues? Critical, informed, citizens may protest and produce pressure for pro-democratic mechanisms and values, underlining the importance of critical

journalism in liberal democracy (Norris, 2019). Informed citizens are capable of resistance, which secures the independent institutions and supports them in doing a good job, therefore protecting the democratic system (Guriev & Treisman, 2022, p. 28). Past empirical experience in other countries during different periods of time suggests as an ultimate goal of this strategy to achieve a state, where democratic mechanisms may still exist, but do not have the democratic purpose. There is a foundation to believe that the ruling coalition wants to securely sustain its position of power and uses systematic attacks on critical media in order to achieve it.

#### **4.4 Democratic backsliding**

From empirical experience we already know that consolidation of political power over media led to the end (at least for now) of liberal democracy in Hungary (Garton Ash, 2019) and there are other examples as well. During interviews with selected journalists, as well as through reading literature that can explain the process occurring in Slovakia during Robert Fico's fourth government, I identified several mechanisms of systematic attacks on journalists, which weaken the country's democracy, as explained in the sections above. Therefore, it is legitimate to examine the concept of democratic backsliding.

Norris (2019) in her research paper *Is Western Democracy Backsliding? Diagnosing the Risks* argues that critical and informed citizens protect the continuance of pro-democratic mechanisms (p. 5), a concept which is being repeated in this analysis. There are scholars who focus on democratic backsliding, but their number, as well as the number of studies, is still limited, so from the perspective of political science, we are not yet talking about a typical theory. However, this thesis demonstrates that this concept is present in Slovakia, which is

confirmed by the results of the analysis of interviews with journalists interpreted through the academic literature that exists so far.

Little and Meng (2024) in their recent article *Measuring Democratic Backsliding* determine three major aspects as the relevant measures for the process of democratic backsliding - electoral outcomes and multiparty competition, constitutional changes and evasions benefitting the governing party, and media freedom, measured by the attacks on the press. This measurement may be tricky and the article indicated that the results of different types of analyses can vary on its subjectivity or objectivity (p. 2-8).

This thesis relies on the experience of Slovak journalists and their interpretation provides valuable qualitative data, which still may have weaknesses - as in any interviews, data may be skewed by personal inputs of the respondents, or other factors, limiting the objectivity of the result. However, the strength of this analysis lies on the selection of journalists, who vary in the level of experience, come from different newsroom and all together agree, that they and their colleagues are experiencing fundamentally harsher attacks by Fico's government officials, which are a part of systematic campaign against free and critical media in Slovakia. Their personal experience is furthermore essential for this thesis as well, answering the research question of how do the attacks from government politicians affect Slovak journalists and the media landscape? Furthermore, it is not just results of this analysis, but also data from Slovak safety platform for journalists, which monitors the attacks, that the number of incidents in 2024 so far is essentially higher than in 2023 and their nature is more serious (Farská, 2024).

Using the concept of democratic backsliding and its measurement as proposed by Little and Meng (2024), this thesis argues that the softer and earlier methods of media assaults can and should be analyzed. Following this strategy provides a more comprehensive, broader scale for

evaluating journalistic freedom, which may supply timely data of the democratic backsliding occurring as soon as the shift begins to happen and the Slovak case indicates its occurrence.

Slovakia is not the only country in the region experiencing this issue, as it has Hungary as the southern neighbor, which also has undergone this process. Some journalists are relying on the potential intervention by the EU, however some are skeptical and claim that already now it's too late, the situation is serious and the response is inadequately weak, arguing that the impact of the EU is so far insufficient. This perception may come from the observation of the Hungarian case, when the EU used the Covid relief funds in order to pressure Orbán to make a certain concession, however none of them threatening his control over Hungarian media landscape (Guriev & Treisman, 2022, p. xiii)

Fico wants journalists to be seen as a political problem, referring to them as enemies, thereby indirectly trying to turn them into a security threat. In reality, the true security threat to the democratic regime is Fico and his government, precisely because of their approach to the media, using systematic attacks and campaign with the goal to suppress independent critical media and limit the awareness of citizens, applying the concept of informational autocrats, when the public is unaware of political propaganda in the new type of 'news' they follow - unchecked political messages and disinformation channel. When successfully using this strategy, Fico and his government can secure themselves masses of uninformed supporters without being threatened to lose power by traditional democratic processes.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis provided an extensive analysis of the attacks on journalists and media by ruling politicians during the first 8 months of the 4th government of Robert Fico in Slovakia. Through the literature review, the thesis established an understanding of the crucial role journalism plays in democracy, the phenomenon of attacks on media and journalists, and the broader context of democratic backsliding and the informational autocracy, in which the attacks on media usually have an essential role. The methodology section delivered the research approach, focusing on the choice of semi-structured interviews and using grounded theory utilized for the development of a contextualized scientific concept of the situation in Slovakia regarding the attacks. The analysis offered empirical insights into the personal experiences of journalists, the strategies employed by politicians, and the resultant impact on the media landscape, all of that in order to answer the research questions of this thesis:

RQ1: How do Slovak politicians of the government coalition use threats and attacks against journalists?

RQ2: How do the attacks from government politicians affect Slovak journalists and the media landscape?

The study revealed that politicians' attacks on journalists are part of a broader, systematic campaign designed to delegitimize the media and destabilize their role in the informational environment. 11 out of 14 participating journalists have personal experience with being attacked by a ruling politician(s) and all participating journalists consider the situation in the past months to some level essentially or significantly worse. The attacks are often framed as a reaction towards a falsely created security issue, portraying journalists as enemies of the state. Incidents does not come from only low-ranked politicians, but the highest political officials of



ruling coalition parties, including prime minister Robert Fico (Smer), ministers Taraba (SNS), Šimkovičová (SNS), Šutaj Eštok (Hlas), MPs Erik Kaliňák (Smer), Danko (SNS), Blaha (Smer) or Gluck (Smer); signaling the rank of issue for the ruling politicians, who decided that media and journalist become a political agenda for their government, which needs to be dealt with. Supporting policies and public rhetoric further this narrative, leading to increased hostility towards the media. This environment not only hampers journalists' ability to operate freely but also erodes public trust in reliable news sources, reducing the public's capacity to make informed decisions.

This thesis also provides analysis of impacts for the Slovak journalists and media landscape. Attacks have various forms and types, what connects them is a continuous fight against critical press by the ruling coalition. Journalists have to deal with copycat attacks from citizens, who often feel invited into the one-sided fight against media professionals and their newsroom. Specifically, journalists experience verbal attacks mostly online but also in real life, threats including violent threats and death threats, and apart of them becoming targets of attacks, their family and close ones are often targeted as well. Analysis showed that even though journalists are used to a certain level of hostility due to the nature of their job, the situation in recent months is significantly more serious. That is supported by a fact that some of the participants have already thought about changing the scope of their professional journalistic interest (for instance stop doing investigations relating politics) or the potential need for changing their profession in the future, which they hadn't considered before and which is caused exactly by the enormous rise of hate campaign against journalists, that affects them personally. Slovak newsrooms have to adapt to the new status quo, which is changing very quickly. Participants of every newsroom or media included in this research (8 media) mentioned certain type of security measures, which were, or were supposed to be, taken in the recent months as a reaction towards the more hostile environment for the industry, to large extent caused by the change of

government and the new approach of the ruling politicians. Journalists repeatedly emphasized the lack of sufficient institutional protection. Study also showed that the media landscape in Slovakia might have a problem in the not so far future with the amount of capable, efficient and eligible young people, who would choose this profession precisely because of the hostile environment journalists have to live in.

Because of this strategy of Slovak ruling politicians, informed individuals might become a minority, lacking the strength to mobilize effectively against the erosion of democratic norms. Politicians, such as Robert Fico, exploit democratic tools while simultaneously undermining their essence.

While this research provides valuable insights into the specific mechanisms of media attacks and their impacts, it also acknowledges limitations. There are several other approaches which crossed my mind during the decision process of how I should deal with this issue and how it can be comprehensively analyzed and understood. One of them was potential radicalization of the public by using threats and attacks as more present aspects of public discourse - something I believe worth looking at, which would make the research broader and more complex. However, even democratic backsliding is a very complex process, and while media attacks are a critical element, other areas such as attacks on NGOs, civil society, the rule of law or the political decisions affecting the international position of Slovakia are also significant. The study highlights the need for further research to fill existing gaps and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the threats to democracy in Slovakia. Another aspect which should be noted is that the 4th term of Robert Fico and his government is still ongoing during the writing of this thesis and the situation might change, even significantly, as understandably almost anything is possible in this regard. However, I do believe it is important to observe and analyze the events during the process, so that the academic community as well as the public

can know, or at least presume, what the present tells us about the situation and how it can possibly affect the future. This also applies to Slovakia's partners, and perhaps most strongly to the European Union, which should not overlook or be indifferent to indicators of eroded democracy in its member states, otherwise, the Hungarian scenario (or even worse) can be inevitable for Slovakia - this is the opinion of journalists involved in this research, and it is also supported by the limited empirical data we have so far.

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