

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, Dennik N, Dennik 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.