

ADA PETRICZKO: Welcome to today's MIT Starr Forum. Thank you so much for being with us here today. We're so glad to see that people from across the world are interested in this subject and that you have taken the time to attend.

My name is Ada Petriczko, and I will have the pleasure of moderating this panel. I'm a journalist and foreign correspondent from Poland. I cover human rights and social justice, currently for *The New York Times*.

I also serve as the Elizabeth Neuffer Fellow at the International Women's Media Foundation. And as part of my fellowship, I conducted research at the MIT Center for International Studies. And I was also a member of the editorial board of *The Boston Globe*.

We're here today to discuss the state of media freedom in Russia, Poland, and Hungary. But before we get started, I'd like to share some housekeeping notes. First, I would like to thank our sponsor, the MIT Center for International Studies.

I also would like to point out to our viewers that we will have a Q&A session at the end of the talk. So please find the Q&A feature on the bottom of your Toolbar. This is where you can type in your questions, and we will hopefully get to as many of them as possible.

In addition, please pay attention to the chat feature, also on the bottom of the Toolbar, where we will be sending our resources, any bios, upcoming events, or other information that may be of interest to you in the future. And now, let me introduce to you our experts, and also the subject of our debate.

When in October last year, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to two veteran journalists-- Maria Ressa from the Philippines, and Dmitry Muratov from Russia-- the global journalist community welcomed this news with both excitement, but also unease. Because the last time a working journalist received this award was in the 1930s, and the recipient, the German editor and the anti-war activist Carl von Ossietzky, was incarcerated in a Nazi concentration camp, and he never regained his freedom.

So I think many of us felt that this time, once again, the award signals a very dangerous time for press freedom. Across the world, journalists face censorship, restrictive legislation, harassment, jail, and in most extreme cases, even death. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 274 journalists were imprisoned for their work in 2020, which is a record number since 1992.

Europe remains the safest place to practice journalism, but even there, the press freedom rankings indicate a growing crisis. And this is especially true of the central and eastern part of the continent. During our debate, we will be presenting three case studies-- the stories of the assaults on media freedom in Russia, Hungary, and Poland.

They are distinct stories, but at the same time, they seem to follow similar patterns, which we will try to pinpoint, and so dissect the anatomy of an autocratic assault on freedom of press. In order to do that, we will examine authoritarian tools and mechanisms. And finally, we will offer recommendations for democratic actions against dissidents.

In all three countries examined, the state of media freedom has significantly deteriorated over the past decade. In Russia, it is, of course, by far the most dire. Ranked at 150 in the World Press Freedom Index, Russia is the most dangerous place in Europe to practice journalism in.

In a way, when we examine the state of freedom press in Russia, we can perhaps look into the future of many countries worldwide. The case of Russia will be presented by Valerie Hopkins, *The New York Times* Moscow correspondent. Until recently, Valerie was the South-East Europe Correspondent for *The Financial Times*, based in Budapest.

Before that, she spent a decade covering the Balkans. Her work has also appeared in *The Guardian*, *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post*, *Foreign Policy*, *Mother Jones*, *Politico Europe*, and elsewhere. She has an MA in Journalism from Columbia University, and a BA in International Relations from the College of William and Mary.

Our second case study will be Hungary, which is not as far on the authoritarian route, but it is following suit. At the 82nd rank in the World Press Freedom Index, the situation of independent media in the country is extremely challenging. There is no better person to tell the story than Veronika Munk, the founding editor-in-chief and head of content development at one of the few remaining independent media outlets in Hungary, *Telex*.

Previously, she was the deputy editor-in-chief at *Index Online News Daily*, where she has worked for over 18 years until she quit in July 2020 with her 80-plus colleagues, because practicing independent journalism was no longer possible at that media outlet. Veronika has a media studies PhD and teaches courses on journalism at ELTE University, the largest Hungarian university.

The third case study today will be Poland, which is the last of the countries to take the authoritarian trajectory. Until the Law and Justice rose to power in 2015, the country was a safe haven to practice journalism in, because it's ranked 18th in the World Press Freedom Index. Ever since then, it has noted one of the sharpest declines reported, and today is ranked at 64th.

The case of Poland will be recounted by media freedom expert and lawyer Paulina Milewska. Paulina is a Senior Advisor for the European Center for Press and Media Freedom. She is currently a PhD researcher at the European University Institute in Florence, and Fellow of the German Marshall Fund's Rethink.CEE program.

Previously, she has worked for the leading quality newspaper in Poland, *Gazeta Wyborcza*. She has also served as a board member for various NGOs. So let me welcome our first speaker, Valerie Hopkins.

**VALERIE
HOPKINS:**

Hi. Hi, everyone. Greetings from Moscow. Thank you very much for having me on this panel. Thank you for inviting me to be on this discussion. It's a big honor to be here with Veronika, who's outlet, *Telex*, was such a valuable source of information to me while I was working in Hungary for *The Financial Times*.

And I think it deserves a lot of applause for being such an independent and impartial outlet at a time when the media scene in Hungary is so polarized and there's so much official distrust, shall we say, of independent media. I'm also grateful to be here with Paulina, whose systemic analysis of the media landscape in Central and Eastern Europe has informed mine very much.

I'm really looking forward to the discussion. And plus, I think this is the first all-female panel I've ever been on, so thank you, Ada, for that. I'm a journalist, so I want to start with the headlines. I just finished-- I don't even think it's been published yet on *The New York Times* website-- writing a story about how Russia's foreign ministry decided today to effectively ban Germany's state-sponsored *Deutsche Welle* outlet which broadcasts here in Russian, English, and German.

The move was taken in retaliation against Germany's media regulator, which banned yesterday-- or I think on Tuesday-- the satellite transmission of RT Deutsch, which it said was banned because they had not gone through the appropriate procedures for registering themselves legally, which is not the case, of course, for RT Deutsch, I believe-- I mean, sorry, for *Deutsche Welle* here in Russia, which I believe has gone through all of the proper and appropriate legal channels to be here and has been operating here since the early 2000s.

We still don't know how many people this will affect on the ground, but it means 144 million Russians are probably going to lose access to the high-quality radio, TV content that *Deutsche Welle* produces. And it's just the latest sort of step against independent international media operating here in Russia.

I was talking to some of my Russian journalist friends while I was preparing for this panel and trying to get from them-- what are some of the big benchmarks? When did we really see a lot of deterioration? And one of them just said three words-- "It was Putin."

So I do think that we can say that media freedom has been an issue since Putin came to power in 2000. Current estimates are that more than 20 journalists have been killed in Russia since he came. But you know, until basically a year and a half ago-- I mean, there are different opinions on this, but another Russian journalist colleague based here said that until about last summer, it was kind of a cat-and-mouse game.

One outlet was forced to close, but its reporters reconstituted themselves elsewhere and founded a new outlet. Yes, there was a very big crackdown in 2014 that coincided with Russia's annexation of Crimea, but what we've seen in the past year and a half has just been kind of relentless. As I said, we happen to have this discussion today, and I have something to report about it to you.

Some people have tied that to what we witnessed in Belarus after the August 2000 presidential elections-- this kind of big outpouring of support for the Belarusian opposition-- and followed by not only a crackdown in Belarus, but a crackdown here in Russia that's also extended to foreign media. In addition to this announced revocation of *Deutsche Welle's* journalist accreditation, the Russian foreign ministry said they would stop all the satellite broadcasts, they would initiate procedures to name *Deutsche Welle* journalists for foreign agents-- which I'll talk about in a bit for those of you that don't know what that is-- and they also said they would create a list of people who were involved in removing RT Deutsche's license and ban them from coming to Russia.

But this isn't the first time. We saw in August of last year, Russia kicked out a BBC journalist who had spent almost half of her life studying or loving Russia and reporting in it, and also in November, a Dutch journalist. Every Friday evening, people are sitting on their computers, reloading the Russian Ministry of Justice website, looking to find out who's been named a foreign agent.

This goes to-- this is about a 2012 law that in 2017 was extended as well to journalists, and then in 2019, also to individuals, that essentially labels these people what is effectively an enemy of state. So they are subject to very onerous requirements of how they spend their money, where their money comes from, and it can be something as arbitrary-- the editor of one media outlet, *Republic*, recently posted on Twitter that he found out that his outlet was named a foreign agent, because some foreign embassies subscribed-- had paid subscriptions, and so did *The Wall Street Journal*.

So it can be incredibly arbitrary, but it comes with a very heavy burden. So *Deutsche Welle*, if they do get added to this register of foreign agents, will join *Voice of America*, which was the first foreign agent to be named in 2017-- first media foreign agent, sorry-- and they'll also join *Radio Liberty*, which was named in 2020.

I think it's also important just to mention at least, if we're talking about a wider crackdown on journalists, this also extends to civil society organizations in Russia. One of the most important stories that I covered last year was the court-ordered liquidation-- the court ordering of liquidation of Memorial, which is a very-- one of the first and most prominent civil society organizations here-- human rights organizations.

It's an archive of Soviet repression and style, especially the Stalinist-era gulag repressions, but it's also a human rights organization that advocates today for human rights and files important appeals before the European Court of Human Rights, et cetera. Many of the people I spoke to-- so it's not only a crackdown on journalists, but it's also a crackdown on organizations that often provide a lot of the research or information that journalists need and use. So Memorial, for instance, is a major supporter of another organization called, OVD-Info, which is the only source of truly impartial accounting of how many people attend protests, get arrested at them, et cetera-- stuff that's important for us to do our jobs.

As the Nobel Prize laureate who Ada mentioned in her talk, Dmitry Muratov, put it in his Nobel speech in December, as governments continually improve the past, journalists are trying to improve the future. As Ada mentioned, I'm very newly arrived in Russia, and I really want to tip my hat to the incredible journalists here. There's often this blanket-- how can I describe it-- blanket statements, I guess, about autocratic countries.

I remember at the beginning of the pandemic when I was in Hungary, and Hungary's parliament gave sweeping powers to Viktor Orban, [INAUDIBLE] Fareed Zakaria, and he was like, there's no media, you know, Orban has trampled over all of it, you know. And I've heard people say the same thing about Putin. And actually, what I really want to stress in this panel is that there are incredible, brave individuals-- not only Muratov, but so many people who are working to do impartial journalism at a time when they are being attacked as enemies, and not rising to take the bait. We've seen this also in America. I should be fair.

So I would like to express my solidarity with them and my deep appreciation to them for helping me to understand this country that I'm still trying to understand. And I think just-- but the problem is, these journalists are so brave, they spend so much time working, they take a lot of deep personal risks, and they're doing it in a situation where they don't have equal access to the-- shall we say, the media market, or to the market of public opinion.

I was taking the train to St. Petersburg, where I celebrated New Year's, just after Christmas, three weeks after Dmitry Muratov presented his Nobel lecture to rapturous applause in Oslo. And a woman came by on the Super Deluxe Sapsan train, fast train to St. Petersburg, with a whole bunch of newspapers. And my friend I was sitting with said, oh, do you have the [SPEAKING RUSSIAN], which means, the new one. And she goes, they're all new. And he was like, yeah, I mean, *Novaya Gazeta*, and she just looked at him.

She didn't know what it was, right? You know, the whole world is watching, and yet, in Russia, a poll from the Levada Center, an independent pollster, which is also a foreign agent, found that only 1/4 of Russians had actually heard about this Nobel Prize. So it's not only about pressure. It's not only about access to information. It's also access to people, to having-- to viewers and readers.

So I think-- I know Ada has a lot of questions. I think I can get into some more specifics later, but I'm really eager to continue this discussion and hear about some of the similarities and some of the differences between Poland and Hungary. Thank you.

ADA Thank you so much, Valerie, and thank you for sharing your latest scoop. And I would like--

PETRICZKO:

VALERIE It's not a scoop, really.

HOPKINS:

[LAUGHTER]

It's everywhere. It's very sad.

ADA Yeah, but I would like to also draw attention-- the attention of our audience to Valerie's latest story from Kazakhstan. It was featured on page one of *The New York Times*, and it's really very strong, brilliant. Congratulations on that. And let us move to our second speaker, Veronika Munk.

PETRICZKO:

ADA Thank you, Ada, and thank you very much for inviting me to the panel. And I'd also like to emphasize how happy I am to be in an all-female panel. It's a first time for me as well, so it's always a pleasure.

PETRICZKO:

Yeah. As we discussed that we are going to have a Q&A session and we have a longer discussion, I just would like to talk a little bit generally about the Hungarian media situation. You said it in your introduction. And as an independent journalist who has worked in Hungary for two decades, and who has a media studies PhD, and who experienced the politically influenced takeover, I can assure you and the audience that the free press in Hungary is in a very bad shape.

You cited the World Press Freedom Index, which is a continuous decline-- now ranks, I think, 92nd. And in 2006, it was the 10th place out of the list of 168 countries. And the only EU country ranking lower is Bulgaria, while countries like Albania, Moldova, and North Macedonia are ahead of Hungary.

When I think through how is the media situation in my country, I can differentiate five different important factors that shape the Hungarian media in the last decade. And the first and most important is how the Hungarian media landscape has fractured into two distinct parts. One part includes the outlets-- the media outlets, which have some kind of connection to the politics, to politicians in the government, and others, which is the minority part of the whole scene, which are independent of the government.

The second-- and this trend that I mentioned, this pro-Orban or pro-governmental media conglomerate, is there. The primary reason behind this trend that is, the ownership structure has changed in the media scene over the past decade, during which more and more independent media outlets fell into the hands of business circles with close ties to the political elite. And it's worth stressing that these businesses did not act independently, but as executors of an overreaching governmental strategy, and their transactions were, at the end of the day, financed by taxpayer money.

And over the past 10 years, even ever more, printed media, radio, and TV stations were acquired by people with connections to politics and politicians. And this pro-governmental media conglomerate is organized. They had basically infinite resources versus the critical media sphere that is mostly only online, is underfinanced, fragmented, and sometimes competing with each other, and hit by the multiple economical crises, like now, the pandemic.

The second factor, after this ownership structure thing, is that the public broadcasting companies in Hungary funded by Hungarian taxpayers for a couple of hundred million US dollars are basically a mouthpiece for the government. Seven TV broadcasters and five radio channels belong to the public broadcasting conglomerate, and there is only one large Hungarian news agency, which basically covers mostly the narratives of the government.

And the third factor, which could be important to mention, is that we have a very unique thing, I think, in all over the world, that several hundred private media outlets are concentrated in a centrally managed foundation called Central European Press and Media Foundation. It's an institution which is supposed to be independent, because it's a foundation, but it's not. It's an institution with a pronounced government bias. This foundation is classified as a matter of national strategic interest by the government.

It was established three or four years ago, and its portfolio includes TV channels, radio stations, online news sites, tabloids, and I think all county dailies-- so all of the media outside of the capital. And there has been no such media holding in Hungary since the Communist era. And the level of concentration, and this model at all, that the foundation will have around 500 media products which are operated centrally, is unprecedented in the country, in Europe, and, I think, all over the world.

The fourth factor is also regarding the media sphere business background, because the advertisement market in Hungary is also heavily influenced by politics. Because one of the biggest players in the advertisement market is the Hungarian state itself, and those who are sympathetic to the administration are allocated advertising-- state advertising. But the others, which are classified as hostile, are excluded. And as a result, they-- or we-- can barely keep their heads above the water.

And the fifth factor, which is the most important in my life, in my everyday life, is the problem that Valerie also mentioned-- the access to information. In Hungary, the situation is not that bad than in Russia. For example, journalists do not go to prison, and there have been no murders of journalists in recent memory, luckily.

But yet, the work of the independent journalists has rarely been more difficult. We do not really just have to struggle to maintain the economic basis for our work, but we also have to fight for access to information, usually running up against brick walls when making inquiries to the public interest interviews. And not getting answers to our questions by authorities is par for the course, which is really frustrating.

So not only is the Hungarian press currently experiencing painful cutbacks, but the ability of people in Hungary to access to information is also being increasingly impaired, because this shrinking media space is limiting the freedom for all of us in this country. And in my opinion, it's weakening the democracy. So that's why we started *Telex* with all of my colleagues. We needed to leave our previous workplace *Index*, when there was some external political influence on the newspaper.

And on a single day, all of us, like 90 of us, decided to quit. So in a nutshell, I think there will be pretty much a lot of questions regarding the Hungarian example, because I think it's really an important case. So I'm looking forward to them. Thank you very much.

ADA
PETRICZKO: Thank you so much, Veronika, and we, all three of us, have been very much influenced by your work. And Veronika didn't mention that, but *Telex* was started a month after they quit, which I think is just incredibly impressive--

VERONIKA
MUNK: Actually, nine weeks. Nine weeks.

ADA
PETRICZKO: Yeah. So thank you so much, and we're moving to Paulina Milewska, our third speaker.

PAULINA
MILEWSKA: Thank you very much, Ada, for inviting me here, and it's a real pleasure to be in an all-female panel for the first time in my life-- same as for Veronika and Valerie. So to start with the Polish situation and the situation in Poland of the media outlets, it is very important to underline that the situation there is still quite different from this in Russia and the situation in Hungary, because still, 80% of the media outlets are independent.

And it's not because of the lack of the energy on the side of the Law and Justice, the ruling party. It's more because of the fact that Poland is quite a big country. It's 37 million people. And also, most of the media outlets were privately owned.

So let's start with the chronology of what happened in Poland. In 2015, the Law and Justice, the party which is ruling right now, with its leader, Yaroslav Kaczynski, came to power. And from that moment exactly, our media outlets' independence started to be undermined.

So they first took over the public broadcaster, Telewizja Polska. They changed the head of the Telewizja Polska. They fired most of the editors, most of the journalists. Some of them quit, because they basically changed Telewizja Polska into a propaganda tool.

It's very important, because in such a huge country as Poland, Telewizja Polska is this channel, which is getting to every basically every house and every place in Poland. So even if you are in a very remote village, you still can have Telewizja Polska. Later, the Law and Justice and Jaroslaw Kaczynski, they knew that it's not enough to just cover Telewizja Polska. Jaroslaw Kaczynski wanted to have, as he said, "Budapest in Poland."

So they started to intimidate independent outlets in different ways. They started to target them with so-called slaps-- so strategic lawsuits against public participation. Right now, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the main, the biggest high-quality daily in Poland, has more than 70 opened cases against it, all of them issued by state-owned companies, by different politicians, by Telewizja Polska.

So they have to struggle with all of these cases, and it's not the example only of *Gazeta Wyborcza*. All of the major independent news media in Poland are struggling with [INAUDIBLE] cases. Another way of undermining the independent media in Poland was of course taking away the advertising of the state-owned companies.

So from one day to another, all of the high-quality media lost this kind of advertising, which was quite a significant revenue, especially for the newspapers. And additionally, all of the state-owned companies and institutions canceled their subscription. So that was the new reality that independent media outlets had to deal with.

Additionally, even during the COVID crisis-- so that's a moment that-- we are thinking that it's a moment of national unity. We are all fighting with the pandemic. The governing party decided that *Gazeta Wyborcza* will be the only newspaper which didn't get the information about the COVID pandemic being printed in it, which was funded by the Ministry of Health.

Another important step toward destroying the freedom of press in Poland was taking over of Polska Press by the big state-owned oil company, Orlen. They bought it from the German publisher, and right now, they are basically influencing the seven daily newspapers, 12 magazines, and over 500 news websites, which are being read by 70 million of viewers. And additionally to that, Orlen bought all of them-- about 65% of shares in the kiosks where the newspapers are being distributed, so that also canceled from all of these kiosks *Gazeta Wyborcza* from all over Poland.

Additionally, what just happened recently is, the whole campaign against [INAUDIBLE] which is an independent news channel, which is owned by the American company, Discovery. So basically, Law and Justice wanted to change the law in the way that a company which is not from the European economic area can't own majority shares in a TV station. In that way, Discovery would be forced to sell. That led to international protests, quite a strong response from the American diplomacy. In the end, Polish president, Andrzej Duda, vetoed this bill, but we won't know what will happen in the future.

Another crisis-- just the recent one was when the media outlets and journalists were banned from reporting from the Polish border during the refugee crisis that is happening there right now. It's basically-- it basically made it impossible to show the situation, to be sure of what is happening there. It made the public just rely on whatever the Belarusian government or Polish government is showing.

To not make my speech longer, as there will be a lot of questions, I am sure, I would just like to underline that to save the media, to save the independent media in such countries as Poland and Hungary and Russia, it's essential to buy the subscription, to support small media outlets there, to support the journalists. And if that's not possible, then it's important to support the international organizations which are supporting journalists and media outlets there. Thank you very much.

ADA

PETRICZKO:

Thank you so much, Paulina, for such an insightful and clear presentation, and we will now move to the panel discussion. I will be directing my questions at individual speakers, but if there's anything that you would like to add after the person has finished answering the question, please go ahead. And yes, the first question will be directed to Valerie, and it concerns something that is on the front pages of news everywhere, meaning the potential invasion on Ukraine.

And we know that the Russian state-owned media played a key role in spreading anti-Ukrainian propaganda, which helped to raise support for the 2014 invasion. And I'm just wondering if history will repeat itself today, or do you think that Russians are just too disillusioned after years of military presence in Ukraine?

**VALERIE
HOPKINS:**

Well, thank you. That's a great question. I can preview a story I have coming out, possibly tomorrow, precisely about this topic. And I happened to spend a lot of time recently watching state-owned media, which is something that most of my friends in Moscow prefer to avoid, and especially some of the sort of major agenda-setting news shows and talk shows.

And I think that this increase, this troop increase, and this rise in tension is, I think, being experienced, in a lot of ways, quite differently than 2014, because precisely of the context that I started talking about before, in the sense that in 2014, despite the fact that Crimea is a very popular destination with many Russians-- many Russians were going there, always sort of felt that it was theirs, you know, and many of them don't necessarily dispute Russian possession of Crimea, while they wouldn't put such a claim on parts of Eastern Ukraine, for instance, where Russian-backed separatists are fighting now.

There were 50,000 people in the streets protesting in March 2014. And now, what we've seen is a petition by prominent intellectuals that's been signed by-- I think I checked today-- 5,000 people. So the repression-- it's a combination, I think, of ongoing and deepening repression on civil society, on protesters and activists, combined with rules and regulations that have been put in place since the pandemic, and sort of an endless onslaught of messaging from public television channels that has, by and large, set the agenda.

I mean, polling-- from what I've seen, many Russians are scared of a war, even [INAUDIBLE] not necessarily to come to them on Russian territory, but whether they have family or friends in Ukraine, or lived there themselves. But almost all of them see it as a provocation that's been organized and pumped up by America. And what we can see from the news has been very much constant--

Different segments I watched on Sunday night-- the show hosted by [INAUDIBLE], which was quite ominous. He sort of alluded to the outbreak of the war, the 2008 Russian war with Georgia, which also started when Putin was at the Olympics-- guess where-- in Beijing. And the whole segment that he did was about *deja vu*, and then that led into a discussion of Americans breaking their promises, in terms of NATO expansion-- a sort of false thesis that America promised never to expand NATO beyond East Berlin.

And then, the next show, *Moscow. Kremlin. Putin*, also focused-- did an hour of Americans breaking their promises or disrespecting Russia. So it's for sure whipping up frustration with the West, with a view to blaming it. And as I said, it's very difficult for many Russians to get access to impartial media at this point, especially outside of Moscow, or whether they choose to hear it or not.

But at the same time, there's another force at bay, which I think is also very true in Poland and Hungary and elsewhere in the region, which is apathy. One sociologist that my colleague spoke to said that he estimated that about 40% of the population had just sort of put up their hands, was apathetic, definitely not interested in watching what they saw as propaganda coming from the state TV, but also really uninterested in seeking further information, and really disappointed with the politics in general.

And the third group that we also spoke to was somebody who really didn't like what Putin is doing at home, but-- I don't know if this is a result of-- he doesn't watch state TV, but still felt that the military buildup was certainly the fault of the US and that Putin is protecting Russia's foreign policy interests. So again, I think this-- decades-long now-- lack of access to independent media is shaping an entire worldview in ways that will have consequences now for years and decades to come.

ADA
PETRICZKO: Thank you so much. The next question will be directed at Veronika. Is it possible for journalists and media outlets to stay objective under an authoritarian regime? And I'm asking this, because from my point of view as a Polish journalist mostly working in Poland, I do feel that independent journalism in my country is often taking the form of-- especially opinion journalism is taking the form of an anti-government activism these days, and I find that quite frightening.

VERONIKA
MUNK: Yeah, thank you, Ada. It's a really, really good question, and there are a lot of discussions about the same thing with my co-journalists, with my colleagues in my country. But my opinion is-- and that I passionately believe in-- that it's necessary to remain impartial. And as I mentioned, it is a constant debate-- that it's a better strategy to use activist journalism and to be oppositional journalist, but I hate the term.

And I-- in Hungary, if you are not a pro-governmental journalist, just because of your existence, you are being labeled as an oppositional one. But I always refuse this label, because I believe that every journalist needs to play with the traditional rules of this profession. And I believe that every journalist's duty is to report objectively and to present information as detailed as possible, and present it in as many angles as possible. And readers or the audience will decide how he or she creates their opinion about any subject.

So I don't think that it's the function of the journalists or the function of the news media, which is my field, to form political opinions in news spaces. Of course there are opinion pieces, which is created for that and help people create their own opinions and own attitudes towards very different kind of phenomena and things in the world. But I strongly believe that impartiality and objectivity is a key factor for journalists to do their jobs.

ADA
PETRICZKO: Yeah, I agree so much with you, and I feel like once we lose that, we start playing by their rules, in a sense, right? And that only worsens the problem.

VERONIKA
MUNK: Yeah, but if I just can-- if I'm allowed to make one more short comment, that it's really, really difficult to keep these rules in a political scene like the Hungarian. Because our job is to ask questions, and if we cannot get answers from the authorities and from the political actors, it's really hard to present the facts in their whole picture. So yeah, the job's to be objective, but the tools are not really easy to do these days.

ADA
PETRICZKO: Yeah, I get that. And I also kind of understand the arguments of the other side, which are that since, in Poland or Hungary, or Russia of course, we no longer have full democracy or full media freedom, it's kind of like a moment when all hands should be on board, and we can sometimes become activists as journalists. I don't subscribe to that view, but I can see the benefits of it as well.

So my next question is directed to Paulina. You mentioned that soon after the outbreak of the humanitarian crisis on the border with Belarus, the government banned the media from entering the border region and reporting there. And so I was wondering, how did the journalists deal with that?

Because we did get some coverage in the end. It was not full coverage. It's not what we would have wanted, but we did see something. And I'm just wondering, what sort of methods did they use? What sort of coverage did you get?

PAULINA

So for from what I know from my friends, some core journalists, some of them were entering the area anyway.

MILEWSKA:

The area that journalists couldn't get into was 3 kilometers wide. But it was like this special place that journalists couldn't enter was [INAUDIBLE] all along the Belarusian border, so it was 300 kilometers long and 3 kilometers wide.

Of course, some people would argue, oh, it's not such a huge, huge piece of-- part of Poland the journalists couldn't enter. But of course, during this crisis and during this situation, that was the place where, for example, journalists couldn't be witnesses of the illegal pushbacks of which the Polish government was accused.

So whenever the journalist was caught within this area, he or she could get up to 5,000 zloty of a fine, which is around \$1,300, or this person could end up even up to 30 days in jail. I didn't hear about any type of jail verdicts, but for sure, the fines were decided for some of the journalists.

ADA

Right. And Valerie, you mentioned a wide array of repressions, repressive measures that journalists face in

PETRICZKO:

Russia. And I was just wondering if those sort of measures also influence your work as a foreign correspondent.

And how do you deal with access to information, for example, in your daily work?

VALERIE

Thank you. That's a great question. I wouldn't say that-- I mean, certainly, it influences my work, as Veronika said, that it's not like you can waltz into the Kremlin and have a tete-a-tete with a high-level official. It's not like you can even go to a security conference and even have access to some of the people who are expressing themselves, and they're thinking the Russian worldview and the Russian perspective on politics. Even if you're just trying to understand them, there's such a mistrust of the press, that that's quite difficult.

HOPKINS:

But in terms of what I write, sure, it doesn't affect me if other than to always keep me on my toes and make sure that we are always following the most important fundamental rules of journalism. You have to ask-- try as best as you can to understand a perspective, even if people sitting in the government or close to them don't want to share it to you. Get a comment. Make sure that everything is as tight as possible, because if you do make a mistake, there will be repercussions.

And I think that, from that perspective, I mean, if you make a mistake in a Western media context, of course, you know, your credibility is at stake, or readers may not trust your byline or your paper. But certainly, of course, here, you may face more consequences. But at the same time, from another perspective, there can be arbitrary things.

You know, I mentioned these two journalists from the BBC and from a Dutch newspaper, [INAUDIBLE], who were pushed out-- it wasn't really necessarily about them. It was geopolitics. And what's happening to the *Deutsche Welle*-- what may happen-- we still don't know if the *Deutsche Welle* has vowed to stay and continue their work-- that's, again, nothing to do with their journalism.

So yes, I think, for some people, it might hang over their heads, but I haven't met anyone that lets it affects the quality of their reporting. If anything, as I said, it's just more difficult to find people who are inside of the government and inside of the system who are willing to share with you their honest opinions and worldviews, and sort of elucidate that for you. I think that's also a function of spending a long time here, cultivating sources, and yeah. I don't know. Does that answer the question?

ADA
PETRICZKO: Definitely. Thank you so much. Veronika, I'm wondering about how-- because we know that the pandemic-- that the government in Hungary used the pandemic as a pretext for extending its hegemony over the media market. And I'm wondering-- you know, that has happened with governments across the world, and we've seen them imposing excessive surveillance-- [AUDIO OUT]

VERONIKA
MUNK: Actually, I lost Ada. I'm not sure that it's a problem in my connection or it's hers.

VALERIE
HOPKINS: Oh, I thought it was me, but I guess it's hers. Oh, dear.

PAULINA
MILEWSKA: It's the same here.

VALERIE
HOPKINS: Why don't you start answering the question, Paulina, since it was directed to you, right?

VERONIKA
MUNK: I'm not sure what the question was. It was how the government using the COVID situation as a pretext, right?

PAULINA
MILEWSKA: Yeah.

VALERIE
HOPKINS: That's a great question, also for Hungary and Poland.

PAULINA
MILEWSKA: Yeah.

VERONIKA
MUNK: OK. Whilst we are waiting for Ada, I'll start to answer from the Hungarian perspective, and then I'll pass the ball to Paulina, because I think in Poland, it's also an important factor to discuss.

Well, yes, of course it was a really important factor in my country, and there were some new laws implemented just because of the COVID situation. It was called emergency laws that basically, the state has larger-- can have larger influence on basically everything that's happening in the country. And the law extended it to journalism as well.

According to the text of the law, it was supposed to expel fake news from social media, but it could have been used against journalists as well, which never happened. So according to the law, they could have used it as a very, very serious restriction, but it's never happened. But I experienced that when I used to work at *Index* and the political influence started to happen around the newspaper, the pretext was the COVID situation, and the pretext was that, OK, we need to make some changes at *Index*, which was the largest, most influential, most known general-interest news daily in the country.

And they said that, OK, here is this horrible financial situation because of the COVID, so we need to make some changes. We need to restructure the editorial staff. And in the end, they fired the editor-in-chief. So I experienced that somehow-- not directly, but indirectly-- politics used COVID when they decided to finish the existence of *Index* as it used to exist. I don't know if I answered the question or not, and I think Ada is with us again.

ADA Yes, I'm so sorry I lost connection for a second. I hope you can hear me well now.

PETRICZKO:

VERONIKA Yeah, don't worry. I answered your question, actually, while you were away.

MUNK:

ADA [LAUGHS] I could hear that. Thank you so much. So we're going to my last question in the panel is directed at Paulina. And it may sound a bit grim, but I feel like I need to ask that.

PETRICZKO:

Well, the autocratic assault on media freedom is part of a larger trend, as we all know-- the fact that democracy is in decline worldwide. According to the 2021 Freedom House report, this democracy gap has been deepening for the past 15 years, and today, nearly 75% of the world's population lives in a country that faced deterioration last year. So faced with such grim statistics, I wonder, can freedom of the press be saved at all?

PAULINA That's a complicated question. And of course, with all of the broad and complicated questions, you don't have one right answer. For sure, what we can do as citizens-- we can subscribe to different media outlets. We can pay for the subscription. We can donate for the journalistic organizations.

MILEWSKA:

That's what we can do from our level. What are the different solutions that depends on the European Union, on different governments? Because it's impossible overnight to create the revenue, and money is very important when it comes to newspapers and to paying for journalists. That was lost over Google, and over Facebook, and over the advertisement shift that happened back then.

It's hard to think about new business models after what happened with the printed newspapers and with the switch to the internet. So it's quite complicated, and different journalistic associations, and also newspapers themselves, they are arguing, for example, for creating a law under which the European Commission would always have to pay for some advertisement in the high-quality media in different European Union member states.

That's one idea for a solution. Another idea is, what if all of the media outlets would be foundations, and then they could apply for grants instead of being companies with shareholders, which might make it impossible to look for other money than the money from selling newspapers? So it's complicated, and on the EU level, it's something that the Commission can see.

And especially Vera [? Jourova ?] is very active when it comes to the protection of journalism and trying to think about the future of media, at the same time, thinking about the future of the European Union. Because without the high-quality media outlets, without the journalists, it's hard to sustain such an important and amazing project, which is the European Union itself.

I'm not sure if it answers your question, but I am afraid there is no good answer to that question right now. We can discuss and speculate, and try and try and try, because we have to do something to save the media.

**ADA
PETRICZKO:** Absolutely, and all of the recommendations you've given us are extremely important. I'm so grateful for you to mention that. Well, we're going to move to the Q&A part of the session right now, because we've received some really great questions from the audience. Thank you so much for them.

The first one-- using the opportunity that this is an all-female panel, it would be interesting to learn if female journalists are affected by the current challenges to press freedom in a different way than their male counterparts. What do you think, guys?

**VERONIKA
MUNK:** Well, I can start, if that's OK. I think it's harder for female journalists. Because I don't know what the situation in Russia and in Poland, but in Hungary, I don't have a content analysis for that, and there was no research regarding how female journalists are being bullied in this country.

But according to my observations, so to say, and my experiences in my Facebook account, and in Messenger, and in other public comment sections-- and so as my female colleagues, political reporters, and economical reporters at *Telex*, we all experience quite harsh bullying in the last couple of years, especially since the Hungarian government started to-- indirectly-- it always needs to be emphasized that it's never directly. But there are some organizations which have quite close connections to the government, and they create-- I call them political influencers, people whose only job is to re-present in the social media.

And basically, their job is to be a megaphone of the governmental narrative. And their other task is basically to bully critical journalists or undermine their positions in the public sphere. And according to my observations, female journalists get more from them.

**ADA
PETRICZKO:** Right. There are also statistics show-- sorry, I think I'm muted. There are also statistics showing that actually, female journalists are more prone to online harassment than male journalists, that it happens more often.

The next question-- there was a really funny comment. Somebody asked, did the Russian government just disconnect one of the panelists? No, I'm afraid it's my internet, but who knows.

So the next question is from Gregory Michener. I am a professor from Brazil and a visiting scholar at MIT Poli Sci. As a Latin Americanist, many of the themes covered by the panelists, such as concentration of media in hands of pro-government, manipulation of public advertising, and lack of access to information, sound very, very familiar.

So support for independent outlets such as *Telex* is critical. Do the panelists see a strong support for such outlets? From where? Coming from international agents, such as foundations, and domestic elites, and where?

**VERONIKA
MUNK:** *Telex* have micro donations from a couple of tens of thousands of Hungarians, basically. So we do not have a large amount of money from international sources. The majority of our revenue stream is coming from readers.

Telex launched slowly, based on crowdfunding. Now, we have the majority of our income from the readers, and the minority is coming from advertisement. But those are micro donations, so we do not have very rich people to give a load of money. So guys in the audience, if you know such people, please recommend them *Telex*, which is an important cause to support.

ADA Right.

PETRICZKO:

PAULINA MILEWSKA: I might just add, the situation in Poland is similar. There is one media outlet, OKO.press, which is fully sponsored by the readers. It was a great success that something like this was able to be sustained in Poland, as it was created just in 2015. And when it comes to *Gazeta Wyborcza*, it's subscription, advertisement, also very big private donors and small donors that want to just do something more than buy the subscription.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

ADA Oh, sorry. Go ahead. Go ahead.

PETRICZKO:

VALERIE HOPKINS: I just want to say in Russia, there's a big phenomenon. Because the space is so small, a lot of people have actually gone to YouTube-- and other outlets like that, but mainly, YouTube-- to kind of try to survive on a combination of donations from viewers and ad revenue. But it's also very interesting that because the content is produced here in Russia, the ad revenue that producers receive is actually much lower, due to the way that YouTube remunerates people.

I don't know if, Veronika, you have this issue, and we don't need to go deep into the way that American tech companies are affecting this. But that also makes me concerned, though, that Russia has increased its criticism of YouTube in recent months, especially after YouTube removed two of Russia-- RT German channels last September over misinformation claims. So that's a big way that independent journalism voices are finding themselves here, but it may be another avenue that's closed before long.

ADA And one of the readers is asking a follow-up question on that. What is the price point for subscriptions? How much are people willing to pay for good journalism?

VERONIKA MUNK: In Hungary, the average is like \$7 to \$10 a month. So I don't think that that's very expensive. I think Hungarians just realized this year that they need to contribute financially if they would like to consume fact-based quality journalism.

And it's enough. I mean, we have, like, 50,000-- yeah, 50,000-- readers who ever contributed financially to *Telex*, and it's sustainable with these numbers. So it can be done. That's my optimistic side. So it's possible to make a newspaper with a large newsroom, because *Telex* has around 80 journalists, so we are one of the largest newsrooms in the country to make it happen sustainably with this hybrid model-- readers, revenue, and advertising.

ADA There's a question for Valerie. What accounts for people's apathy in Russia? And then, it's the same phenomenon also happening in Poland and Hungary?

PETRICZKO:

**VALERIE
HOPKINS:**

I'll try to answer briefly, since we are running out of time. I think we could have a whole, like, 50,000 panel discussions about this topic. I think it's quite difficult. I listened to a sociologist recently on *Ekho Moskvy*, the one sort of liberal-leaning radio station that's also partially owned by Gazprom Media, one of the biggest media conglomerates owned by Gazprom, which is an oil and gas company.

And his assessment was that it's, A, the fear of jail and repression, and B, a certain sense of-- a certain resigned sense that whatever you do, you won't have any effect on the outcome, so why bother trying-- I think, is what a lot of it boils down to. I think it's that sense of complete lack of, I guess, what in political science is called, external efficacy. Political science professors on here, correct me if I'm wrong, please.

But yeah, there's this belief that no matter what you do, you can't change anything. And a lot of friends, a lot of people I know in my sort of liberal bubble-- educated, who speak English-- they just sort of-- they are aware of what's going on, but they're not actively seeking out the news, because they really want to tune it out. Otherwise, it's just too upsetting, and it's too absurd.

So many things, like also from three years in Hungary-- like, so much stuff that you see in main pro-government media outlets, it's just absurd. Sometimes it's funny, but sometimes it just makes you want to cry, so I think people don't want to expose themselves to that.

**PAULINA
MILEWSKA:**

If I may jump in, so I wouldn't say that we are dealing with a lot of apathy in Poland. Poland is a strongly polarized country, which is more split, 50-50. So like 49% of the voters is voting for the opposition party or the opposition candidate for the president. Also, in Poland, we are having quite a lot of protests, anti-governmental protest, protests which are the answer for their anti-abortion law, which are the answer for them trying to do different things with [INAUDIBLE]

So there are protests. The protests are huge. But still, the problem with the media is that what is happening with them is sometimes happening with a lot of small steps. So it's not like one super, super quick hit at all of the media outlets. It's like one small administrative law after another.

And let's be honest. When there is a lot of stuff in general going on, with a lot of institutions, with reproductive rights, that's something that I would say is the least appealing to people to protest about. So that's the problem that I see.

**ADA
PETRICZKO:**

Yeah. Maria Ressa, the Nobel Peace Prize recipient, called that a death by 1,000 cuts, in the sense that the autocratic assault doesn't come all at once like a hurricane. It's usually a very gradual process in which sometimes it's hard to be aware of it while it's happening. I have a question, actually, to my panelists. Are we OK to stay for five or 10 minutes, tops, to just answer all of the questions that the audience has asked? Great. Wonderful.

So the next one from Sean Walker-- in both Poland and Hungary, the governments claim that before we came to power, it was the same, but the other way around-- claiming the opposition, when in power, also had their own pet media outlets. Clearly, this is an exaggeration. But is there any truth to it at all? And did this help in some way to erode trust in the media in general? Thank you for a great question, by the way.

**VERONIKA
MUNK:**

Yeah, it's a great question. Hi, Sean. In terms of Hungary, as I mentioned, I have been a journalist in the last 20 years, so I was already a journalist when different governments ruled the country. And I was a journalist when the previous Fidesz government ruled the country, so I could see the difference.

And yeah, there might be some right basis of this narrative that the previous liberal socialist government had their media. But what I experienced as a journalist is that before, in the first 10 years of my political career, I got answers for my questions, you know. And I didn't really care who the owners are above my head and in other media outlets. Because it didn't matter, because media owners never really influenced the content and influenced the staff members of the newspapers.

And if I call the Ministry with some important questions regarding any public interest stories, I got answers on the same day. And it changed, and they changed dramatically. Not quickly, but through the last decade, basically, access to information-- I would not say this disappeared, because we do have some possibilities and opportunities to make connections to the politicians and authorities, but it became extremely hard to fulfill our jobs as journalists.

**ADA
PETRICZKO:**

Thank you so much. There is a question directed to Valerie from [INAUDIBLE] I'm sorry if I mispronounced your last name. Can Valerie tell us how hard or easy it is to interview people in Russia? Are many willing to go on record? Are many interested in talking with you? Thank you.

**VALERIE
HOPKINS:**

Thanks for the question I want to repeat that I'm still a little bit new here, and there's a pandemic. So I don't know, [INAUDIBLE], if you mean high-level officials or if you mean ordinary people. I think it's a mixed bag. I mean, I'm very shy sometimes. I don't like to do vox pops.

But in general, people do speak to us. I think it's not-- how can I put it? We can request an interview, and it can take some time, or sometimes it can take some time to get a statement. But I don't want to-- I want to be fair, actually, to-- the government interviews that I've sought, which are not so many, I've gotten.

Maybe they were on Zoom, or maybe it took a week or 10 days to organize, but I think it's still possible. But I think that's partially because of the incredible privilege that I have to work for *The New York Times*. But as I said, I don't know exactly what level of people that you meant. But there are certainly people who would mistrust us or not like us.

The pandemic, of course, provides a different level of-- provides a plausible reason not to have a meeting. I think it was hard in Hungary as well, you know. I think I interviewed all of two ministers in the three years that I lived there. And that's also quite difficult.

I mean, I worked for *The Financial Times*, and I couldn't meet the finance minister. The foreign minister preferred to do interviews in Washington or New York with colleagues that weren't locally based. And I think you'll see that a lot, because people are keen to have media exposure, but not necessarily if they're going to be asked really hard questions. I hope that answers your question.

**ADA
PETRICZKO:**

Another question is from an anonymous member of the audience. And I think-- yeah, it's directly to Paulina. Is the oil/gas company, Orlen, a government-sponsored slash owned company? If Orlen purchased the media site of a German publishing company, how does that lead to media oppression in Poland?

If Orlen is not a government-owned company, don't the editors have the right to write whatever they want? Would that be any different than, let's say, just Jeff Bezos owning *The Washington Post*? Would that mean that he is, in some way, manipulating facts to fit his political viewpoints? That's really interesting.

**PAULINA
MILEWSKA:**

So Orlen is a state-owned company. And also, it's important to understand that in Poland, the heads of the state-owned companies are elected by the governing party, the governing coalition. So basically, the head of Orlen company, Daniel Obajtek, is-- he's described as the protege of Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the head of the Law and Justice.

And because in Poland, it's different than in Hungary-- we don't have a lot of oligarch business people who are connected to the ruling party-- the Law and Justice basically decided to do a similar thing that Orban did with media in Hungary, but to use state-owned companies. And as Orlen is the biggest and the wealthiest state-owned company, that was, in a way, a natural choice to use.

And of course, we can argue that it's a company, it can be state-owned, and that the media are just the business, so they should be independent. But of course, it doesn't work like that. So after buying the Polska Press, they just changed a lot of the editors-in-chief of these local newspapers, of these local magazines.

Also, there is the chilling effect, because everyone knows what happened in Telewizja Polska. If you don't want to lose your job, you are thinking twice about writing something negative about Law and Justice and Jaroslaw Kaczynski. And we have to remember that even the work of the journalist is quite precarious right now in Poland.

And in Warsaw, you can find a new job for a different media outlet, but if you work in a smaller city or a middle-sized town, like, let's say, [? Rzeszow, ?] you just have one place where you can work. So if you will be fired after 20 years of working for this newspaper or magazine that belongs to Polska Press, and you have a family, you have a mortgage, et cetera, what will you do with yourself? So it's not-- sometimes they even don't have to say something directly to introduce the effect they want to achieve. I hope that answered the question.

**ADA
PETRICZKO:**

Thank you for such an insightful answer. Then, there is a question from Chapel Lawson. What is the level of journalistic corruption in Russia, Hungary, and Poland, meaning both pro-regime and anti-regime outlets? Anybody want to take that?

I would say it's a difficult question, and to be honest, I don't have any data on that. I would be happy to research it and get back to you after the panel, because immediately, nothing comes to my mind in terms of corruption in Poland, in journalistic corruption.

**PAULINA
MILEWSKA:**

[INAUDIBLE] It depends how we define corruption and what you mean by corruption. Because I wouldn't say that the classical corruption, like paying a journalist to write an article or not write an article, is something that occurs a lot in Poland. But if you mean by corruption, being happy to write whatever Law and Justice would like some journalist to write, and then being sure that you will get state advertisement, that you will get financial support for your outlet, then we can see that a lot in the pro-governmental media.

**VERONIKA
MUNK:**

Yeah, as I also mentioned, the pro-governmental media scene have a lot of money allocated from the state. But it's not par-excellence corruption. It's the legal way to finance media and to reach the situation that millions of people can have the narratives throughout media outlets and social media actors, to consume the one-sided reality of the things. So yeah, corruption can mean a lot of things. But if you mean that in an envelope, you get money, it's not really common in Hungary-- but the state-organized version.

ADA And the last question, because we need to be wrapping up, comes from William Franks. He's asking, in Russia, during communist times, [INAUDIBLE], which were copied books and magazines, circulated by hand amongst friends and colleagues. Are there such efforts currently in Russia or Poland or Hungary?

VALERIE HOPKINS: I can start. I guess this is samizdat. And I think we live in a totally different period of social media, which is why we see different attempts to crack down on social media, more than a need for covertly spreading information. But I think this is certainly why Russian government has been trying to take a stronger line against Facebook.

Russian government has been trying to get, for instance, the App Store to remove apps, for instance, on election day in September. Or just before election day, the Russian government requested that the app stores of Google and iPhones remove apps that were a smart voting app for Navalny. So I mean, this is not samizdat.

This is not a fake information, but this was an app where people who were in favor of the opposition movement led by Alexei Navalny, who's now in jail, could figure out who to vote for that would minimize-- maybe to oppose Putin and try to do a joint opposition, the way that Hungary's has united. I do actually think there is one samizdat outlet in Hungary that is being printed and delivering, in small scale, though, to-- and I wanted to do a story about it before I left, but maybe Veronika can tell us about it.

VERONIKA MUNK: Yeah, it's not the real samizdat that it used to be in the Communist era, but there is one version of printed-- these leaflets that the English were writing. And this is a smaller group of people who basically pick news stories from independent online outlets, they print it, and they take it to smaller villages to people who do not consume their news through online.

So that's how they can get critical independent news. Because if they consume it through their county dailies or through radio or through the state television, they will only have one narrative. So this small group of people, they call themselves [INAUDIBLE], which can be translated like, print it yourself. And they print these papers, and they put it to the post box to elderly people in villages, mainly, so they can get the news which is only online.

PAULINA MILEWSKA: If I can jump in, Poland we don't have this kind of phenomena that happens regularly, but around the election, *Gazeta Wyborcza* was creating a special edition that they were just taking to the smaller towns, to the villages, and they were giving it for free with the articles about elections about the government, et cetera. So in this way, they were trying, at least to some small extent, to counter the narrative, which is channeled through the propaganda tube, which is basically Telewizja Polska right now.

ADA Right. Well, thank you so much, guys, and thank you for joining us today, to our audience from all over the world.
PETRICZKO: And thank you to our sponsors. Please note that we have many upcoming events. Details are in the chat feature, and we hope to see you again. Thank you.