

2021 Czech and Slovak Freedom Lecture

“How Journalists Survived Backsliding and State Capture”

By Beata Balogová

Beata Balogová, editor-in-chief of the Slovak daily SME, delivered the 2021 Czech and Slovak Freedom Lecture on November 17, 2021. The Lecture is an annual event inaugurated in 2000 and hosted by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C. It is cosponsored by the Embassy of the Slovak Republic, Embassy of the Czech Republic, Friends of Slovakia, and American Friends of the Czech Republic. Due to covid-19 protocols the lecture was presented virtually via live stream from Bratislava, Slovakia. The following is Ms. Balogová’s text as prepared for delivery.

“Dirty, anti-Slovak prostitutes, a flock of swine of George Soros, hyenas, slimy snakes, and idiots.”

These are only a few of the names that former three-time prime minister Robert Fico has used publicly for journalists in Slovakia. Both in power and opposition, before and after the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak.

It did not take long for Igor Matovič, after beating Fico in the elections, to verbally attack journalists. He said we are blinded by hate, take orders from the oligarchs and our only goal is to humiliate him.

You might be wondering why I started my speech by quoting two of the most notorious journalist haters in Slovakia. Please bear with me. It is not just a trick to get your attention.

The reactions of Fico and Matovič to journalists prove that our country has a functioning, free, and critical press. It has been a long and difficult journey. We journalists, just like our society, have had to mature and grow up.

Many of us survived Vladimír Mečiar, who in the 1990s sold state property to his buddies for a dime. He ordered the abduction of the president’s son, and pushed the country into international isolation.

We survived three governments of Robert Fico. He created a system where party connection brought fortune, political positions, and protection from prosecution. Some of us are survivors of oligarchic media capture.

Unfortunately, there were victims. Our hearts will never stop bleeding for Jan Kuciak and his fiancé Martina Kušnírová.

But we are still here, and we report about how oligarchs close to the Smer party penetrated the police and prosecution. How politicians interpret public service as a chance to get rich.

We are here to bust myths and lies that are now replacing facts and science. We are here to report that 30 years after the Velvet Revolution, our democratic institutions are once again under attack.

We are here to warn that Viktor Orban keeps inspiring wannabe autocrats in the whole region. He has already invited Jaroszlav Kaczinski of Poland to apply his methods. Orbán is ready to export his model of media capture across the region.

But let's leave the rulers alone for a while. I would like to take you to my own beginnings, the 1970s in former Czechoslovakia, to a small village called Gemerská Panica.

I take you to a kitchen with a stove. No hot water and no television but thousands of stories that generations have left in the porcelain cups. After dark, the women of the family would tell stories about men who came back from the Second World War so thin and helpless that women had to feed them like little children.

Some, after regaining their strength, tortured their wives recounting all the horrors they had seen. I heard stories about the local chief of the communist party who ordered the confiscation of my grand aunt's cows. She kept cursing him for years until he hanged himself in his cellar.

While listening to these stories, I asked my grandmother "Is that really true?"

"When you grow up, you will find out. We only pass on the stories we have heard, but you can search for the truth," she replied.

After growing up in a society where truth was never public and critical journalism was a privilege of samizdats and banned authors, I wanted to be something more than just a local storyteller.

I will take you now to 1989, to the main hall of Comenius University. A couple of days after students were brutally beaten by the police in Prague, I sat there with fellow students trying to find our proper roles.

Are we journalism students or revolutionaries? Shall we march and shout for freedom of speech, or shall we take notes and photos? We, of course, go to protest at the squares.

We understood that freedom was the toughest but also the most important lesson we were about to learn. But we had no idea how difficult it was going to be and how long it would take.

After a couple of weeks, we had to return to school, only to find there the grim reality of journalism education. Professors who taught Critiques of Bourgeois Media, Philosophy of Marxism-Leninism, or History of the Communist Press, tried to reinvent themselves. It did not work.

We lacked generations of experienced journalists who could explain the basics: how to make reporting balanced, how to quote sources, how to separate facts from opinion. That factchecking is not censorship and editors are not censors.

Suddenly, we were free to write whatever we wanted, but only a few were telling us how to do journalism. One of the very first people who told me that I need multiple sources to write a story was a Fulbright Scholar, Maureen Nemecek, who came to Bratislava in 1992 from Oklahoma.

“Beata, come to the United States to study journalism. You can get into any school, even Columbia,” she told me.

There is, however, an interesting detail: in the early spring of 1993, Maureen was most excited about the story of brave reporters of the *Smena* daily who in protest of state interventions to their newspaper quit and went to start their own paper. She wanted to meet with its editor-in-chief at the time, Karol Ježík, who is no longer alive, and the founder Alexej Fulmek. Today, I am the editor-in-chief of that newspaper.

I did get a Fulbright grant and went to the United States to learn the golden rules of journalism. I came back to Slovakia in 1995 but no school prepared me for the experience of a backsliding democracy under the regime of Vladimir Mečiar. I worked at the English news desk of the state-run news agency TASR. I had a pretty short career there, lasting only until I failed to produce lengthy celebratory stories about the congress of the ruling HZDS party.

My case of repression is very modest compared to those who reported the story of the abduction of the president’ son, the massive abuses of the Slovak Intelligence Service, as well as the wild privatization of state property.

At that time the Intelligence Service followed and wiretapped journalists. Mečiar went further than just verbal attacks. A former boxer, he punched a reporter after they asked him repeatedly about his luxury villa.

But the horror of Mečiar and his regime was a kind of vaccination for my generation of journalists. Since then, we have been prepared to alert society when we notice deviations from the rule of law. Since then, we harshly criticize people who abuse their power, and we carefully inspect what they try to hide behind state interest.

We have understood the risks of populism and the dangers of state interventions in the media. Unfortunately, since the fall of Mečiar, we have seen those things again.

Now, another scene: Editors of all major dailies are sitting around a long table in the offices of government, invited by the then prime minister Robert Fico. We are shocked, angry and we are bleeding. Our colleague Ján Kuciak and his fiancé Martina Kušnírová have just been brutally murdered. Our host is assuring us that the police will do everything to find the murderers.

This happened just a couple of minutes after Fico held a press conference and theatrically put a million euros in actual banknotes on the table for anyone who could provide information about the murderers. It was like a scene from a mafia movie. It all felt so wrong.

They tried to tell us that the murder of a journalist in Slovakia did not make any sense. My colleague Matúš Kostolný, editor-in-chief of *Dennik N*, responded that it might be the time to talk about the mounting verbal attacks against journalists. Fico was appalled – he did not see any connection.

But verbal attacks against journalists can make them targets. If you dehumanize journalists and name them enemies and the dirt of society, then someone might assume that they can get away with physical attacks. Many politicians still do not seem to understand that their words are triggers.

The investigation of the murder unveiled a practice of the brutal surveillance of journalists. It was not organized directly by the state as it was under Mečiar, but by one of the protégés of the regime: mafia figure Marian Kočner -- the suspected mastermind of the Kuciak murder -- and his friend Peter Tóth. Tóth is a former journalist who in the mid-1990s investigated the crimes of the Mečiar regime but later switched sides and went straight from the editorial office to serve the intelligence services.

Kočner's commandos followed journalists to their private places, took photos of their families, even their children. Tóth played it down, claiming it was only ordinary *paparazzi* targeting their colleagues. It was not. In fact, Ján Kuciak was among the monitored journalists.

Kočner allegedly once told Tóth: it would be enough to kill one journalist and all the others would get scared and leave them alone. If that did not work, then he would take down another one.

It did not work - quite the contrary. It is only thanks to journalists that we have learned all the details of the underworld that Kočner and oligarchs close to the party Smer had built. Slovak journalists once again did incredible investigative work.

Robert Fico had to step down under public pressure, and today several functionaries of his party are under criminal prosecution. At present, Fico wants to come back again, and, this time, he has a role model: Viktor Orbán.

I will take you now to Budapest, Hungary. It is 2019 and I am sitting with a group of media freedom watchdogs at the editorial office of *Nimród*, a hunting magazine. We are meeting Zoltán Kovács, the international spokesman of the Hungarian government, who, at the same time, is the editor-in-chief of this magazine. Very weird, but this is the least-disturbing detail of our press freedom mission.

Kovács tells us that journalists are not entitled to control the government, and that critical journalists in Hungary are political activists and Hungary-haters anyway.

Hungarian colleagues we met have described a coordinated system of censorship and content control not seen since the fall of the Communist regime. Orbán does not need to kill or jail journalists. His government silences the critical press through manipulations of the media market, forced takeover of critical media, and delegitimization of journalists. His empire of pro-government media serves as a vast propaganda machine that disseminates fake news for free.

Orbán is no longer Hungary's problem. He aims to export his illiberal media model to elsewhere in Europe, and autocrats across the Visegrad Group are eager to learn from him.

He massively invests in media in Slovakia, Romania, Slovenia, and Croatia. He is trying to kidnap the Visegrad and turn it into an alliance against Brussels and liberal democracy, claiming that the EU does not respect the 'national identities' of Hungary and Poland. His narrative is quite appealing for autocrats and corrupt politicians: central Europe and post-communist countries need a special kind – a tailor-made rule of law and democracy.

Which leads us to Brussels. Whenever I meet officials from EU institutions, and they ask what the EU should do to improve the situation of journalists, I say that the Union should enforce its own rules when it comes to press freedom and human rights. We will report when there are violations and deformations of democracy; but you must protect your own values.

There are not different versions of democracy for each autocrat.

Now, back to Bratislava again: Slovakia is undergoing a purge of state power – former police presidents are accused of abuse of power, and high-ranking former state officials stand accused of corruption. These are challenging times again.

We journalists must closely watch if the police and prosecution respect the law even when they prosecute people who, according to our opinion, deserve it. We face attacks once again. They call us agents of foreign powers, oligarchs, or George Soros.

Unfortunately, oligarchs have been aggressively buying media in central Europe. My own personal story got entangled with an oligarchic group, Penta.

Let me take you to another scene. It is late autumn 2014, and I am sitting in the office of Petit Press publisher and founder of the *SME* daily Alexej Fulmek. He is asking me to take over as editor-in-chief of *SME*.

Penta, involved in the corruption scandal Gorilla, bought shares of the publishing house through a mediator and forced itself on Petit Press. Penta was buying media to improve their stained image – a kind of atomic weapon. Yet, by interventions into the newsroom, it only further harmed their already bad reputation.

So, there we were, Alexej, the genuine publisher and one of the best media minds in Slovakia, and me facing the Hamletian question: should we try to keep *SME* alive or let it fall apart? My

friends and colleagues were leaving *SME* in protest of Penta. They established their own newspaper, which has grown into a successful and important publication.

I stayed with Alexej together with a handful of people to try to keep *SME* independent. As many of you know, there is a happy ending, we have not only survived Penta, but we have rebuilt *SME*.

Our secret of success was the combination of a publisher who understands media and journalists who have integrity. Penta learned that they could not penetrate and change *SME* and they finally agreed to sell their stock to a New York-registered nonprofit investment fund for independent media.

Why is Slovakia's media environment in better shape than Hungary's or Poland's?

We were vaccinated against backsliding in democracy early on by the Mečiar regime. We learned then not to depend on state advertisement or state subsidies, but to explore instead the reader-supported paywall model. Also, we learned that, for an important cause, journalists can join forces across newsrooms.

Many people have managed to stay journalists for more than just a few years. Today, we have seasoned colleagues in their forties and fifties who could lecture others in the art of freedom-minded journalism.

Even though political interventions into the public service media are still ongoing, there is a functioning media plurality, and the state has never managed to build such a propaganda empire as Hungary's Orbán.

We are also protected by our proportional election system that forces parties to cooperate and puts some restraints on autocratic instincts. But of course, we are not insured.

Inspirations from Orbán may teach our next candidates for autocracy how to make their rule more lasting than just four years. Indeed, we can lose democracy from within through democratic elections.

But I reject the arguments that post-communist countries are not built to live in the kind of democracy that the West has built.

We journalists are here to warn about the dangers and deviations.