

Veronika Munk

Hungarian journalist - former editor-in-chief of the news portal Telex.hu.

"First they came for the journalists. We do not know what happened after that."

Several recent cases show that journalists working in the field are no longer considered questioning parties by those in power, but enemies, and even physical abuse is acceptable to them. But as long as the reporter remains in front of the camera with defiant professionalism, and as long as the reader does not turn their head away, the pushing will only remain a spectacular certificate of the weak, the questions cannot be cleared away.

Journalists are being pushed, threatened, and labeled as garbage to be cleared away. The Hungarian government itself reports Szabolcs Panyi for espionage, who wrote an article about Péter Szijjártó leaking information about EU negotiations to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov - thus, the power is crossing boundaries that seemed insurmountable not so long ago.

Several incidents occurred this month where reporters were hindered in their work by physical violence. On March 10, László Vécsei, the mayor of Csákberény, pushed two staff members of Telex out of a public residential forum, while Deputy Prime Minister Zsolt Semjén was in the immediate vicinity. A few days later, at the March 15 Peace March, on the instructions of Gábor Kubatov's secretary, security guards physically hindered the HVG crew in their reporting, pushing them off the road where they were reporting from. An organizer yelled at the reporter that they were disabled, and then instructed the security guard to "clear them out of here". On March 16, an RTL reporter was squeezed when he tried to ask the Prime Minister a question in Kaposvár.

If someone is a reporter dealing with public life - I practiced this great profession for a decade -, they roughly get used to being verbally abused, humiliated, and insulted. However, pushing and physical atrocities have only occurred sporadically so far, and now there have been at least three in one week - in all three cases cited above, female reporters were the targets of the shoving.

For this article, I spoke with five journalists from five different media outlets, both men and women, who regularly report from the field up close.

The current cases show that journalists working in the field are no longer considered questioning parties. The agitated power potentate sees them as enemies, and even physical abuse is acceptable to them. We are witnessing the pushing of nobodies in a polarized society driven to the max, the outsourcing and domestication of violence.

Júlia Halász, a staff member of Partizán, sees this process as follows: "They deliberately created political opponents out of journalists, thereby successfully achieving that it is not only considered normal, but a straightforwardly exemplary behavior to push the journalist, throw them out of the event, hit them, snatch the camera or microphone out of their hands." This is the aggression of helplessness: when there is no argument for the question, what remains is the flaunting of physical superiority and the grabbing of arms. The goal is to restore the hierarchy: to show the questioner that in this system, it is not the public interest that dictates, but power.

In this poisoned atmosphere, reporting sometimes degenerates into psychological warfare. One reporter sheds light on the excesses of petty kings and security personnel as follows: "It is difficult to concentrate on asking the Prime Minister a good question if his bodyguards are pushing you in the meantime. Total madness!" The journalist is fighting not only for the answer, but also for their own

physical space. After every squeezing, one has to rest for the next interview, says one of them, since professional coolness must be maintained even amidst constant abuse.

Bad news for the pushers is that the response of the shoved colleagues is not fear in any of the cases. "I refuse to take on the expected macho, muscle-flexing attitude, nor the role of the intimidated little girl. This presence disturbs the men in power because as a woman I am not in the role intended for me, just as the journalist's question disturbs the arbitrary politician. I know that the body can be restricted, but the freedom of the spirit cannot. I refuse to accept living in a country where aggression against journalists is acceptable," says Noémi Martini from HVG.

Defiance is also a professional strategy: the mechanism of oppression can be learned, and resistance begins when the journalist remains immovably in front of the camera.

"It's not about me, but what I want to show," says Dániel Simor, a reporter for Telex. "Obviously, it is unacceptable for anyone to be touched without their permission. In the case of journalists, the abuse is also directed against those people who would be interested in what we want to show right now."

A reporter from one of the major TV channels simply detaches the events from themselves: "I absolutely see myself from the outside at such times. I guess the goal is to humiliate or make me afraid, but all I feel is that the camera is rolling, thanks to which I can show the operation of the current politician."

Let's record: the only intention of a good reporter in the field is to present what is happening. They ask questions, search for the truth, the facts, get close, and with the information they uncover, they contribute to the free decisions of the people.

They do not go to nitpick, not to be a guest, their presence is not optional, because they are the extended eyes, ears, and mouth of the citizen: they inquire and report on what is happening. They ask the questions that affect us all. And if they don't get an answer, they ask again. We teach these qualities to young people at the university in the media department, and we look up to those journalists in the profession who work the way the field staff of quality media do their jobs.

"First they came for the journalists. We do not know what happened after that."

The quote is an adaptation of the World War II poem "First they came..." by German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller, and perfectly illustrates the importance of reporters' work. A well-functioning democracy is unimaginable without free, critical journalists and the media's function of controlling power and disseminating information. Without shoving.

Despite the dismal situation, it gives cause for optimism that it seems many among the readers, viewers, and listeners understand that quality journalism is vital in an uncertain world. There are more and more people who not only follow the work of good journalists, but also assure them of their solidarity, and are even willing to financially support those papers, video channels, and podcasters whose goal is to bring everyone closer to understanding the events by reporting from up close.

Because ultimately this is what it's about: every grabbing of an arm, every reaching into a camera, and every pinning to the wall is an attempt by power to create blind spots in our reality. But as long as the reporter remains in front of the camera with defiant professionalism, and as long as the reader does not turn their head away, the pushing will only remain a spectacular certificate of the weak.

Journalists might be escorted out of a room, they might be denied the floor at a press conference where "the government tells what it is doing and why", or they can be pushed off the road, but the questions cannot be cleared away.

The author is the director responsible for innovation and new markets at the Slovak Denník N, which also publishes the Hungarian-language paper Napunk.