

Professional Threats and Self-Censorship in Lithuanian Journalism

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The article examines the professional threats experienced by journalists working in Lithuanian newsrooms. The analysis is based on a representative survey of Lithuanian journalists conducted from October 2022 to February 2023 ($N = 302$). The study revealed that physical attacks against Lithuanian journalists are quite rare, but psychological threats related to the profession are relatively common. The results of the study show that male journalists face different threats more often than female journalists, and journalists working in regional or local media experience more various forms of insecurity compared to those working in national media. However, no differences were found between private commercial and public media regarding the frequency of professional threats among journalists. The results show a statistically significant correlation between the insecurity experienced by journalists and the stress they experience when performing journalistic work. Additionally, the research results indicate a significant correlation between experienced insecurity and journalists' concerns about their psychological and physical well-being. Finally, the analysis identified a statistically significant relationship between the use of self-censorship by journalists and the frequency and intensity of professional threats experienced. The article was prepared as part of Project No. S-MIP-22-19 'Lithuanian Journalism in the Contexts of Political, Economic and Social Risks' (2022–2024) funded by the Research Council of Lithuania.

Keywords: journalists, media, professional threats, safety, self-censorship

INTRODUCTION

Media and its core axis – journalism – are a vital component of democracy, which by informing citizens, can have a significant influence on public decision-making, as well as the development and quality of democracy. Journalistic activities are situated within a system of political, economic and social factors and face various threats that jeopardise the safety of journalists, an issue that has been recognised as a global concern (Orgeret, Tayeabwa 2020). If in the past it was more a problem of the so-called global south countries, then in the last decade, this problem has been actualised in Western democracies as well, although not yet to the same extent as in autocracies or countries moving towards authoritarianism (Waisbord 2022). However, when it comes to Western European countries, psychological threats to journalists are emphasised more than physical ones, although the effects of psychological threats

can also significantly negatively impact the quality of public information. A study conducted in Sweden showed that intimidation and harassment of journalists (aggressive and insulting comments), experienced by a third of journalists in the country, promote fear and self-censorship among journalists (Nilsson, Örnebring 2016).

Journalists who have fled authoritarian countries for democratic ones also face significant threats. Syrian diaspora journalists who have established networks in democratic countries perceive digital and physical threats as inevitable (Porlezza, Arafat 2021). Additionally, the television network 'Iran International' was forced to suspend its broadcasts in the United Kingdom due to threats against journalists working in London (Wright 2023). Journalists face insecurity from various extremist groups online and offline, as well as from followers of populist and extremist politicians. Attacks on journalists of various kinds spread during the COVID-19 pandemic as they covered protests against lockdown measures.

According to Reporters Without Borders (2022), Lithuania provides a relatively favourable environment for journalists, where they usually do not face physical danger. However, in the past year, journalists have experienced a significant verbal aggression from various groups of protesters, most directed against COVID-19 restrictions. In 2021, Lithuanian media organisations even issued a public statement calling for police attention to ensure journalists' safety during public events (Lrt.lt 2021). When examining the constraints and professional threats to journalism in Lithuania, legal, political, economic and organisational restrictions on media freedom and journalist autonomy were analysed (Jastramskis 2014; Valentinavičius 2016). From a comparative perspective, the threats to journalistic discourse in Lithuania and Estonia arising from advertising, public relations, and political news management were discussed (Balčytienė, Harro-Loit 2010), as well as the resilience of Baltic media systems in a globally networked environment (Kõuts-Klemm et al. 2022).

It should be emphasised that the studies assessing the risks of journalistic activity in Lithuania evaluate external indicators, such as changes in media markets and structures, or other factors that restrict journalists' work, such as changes in laws. These analyses are conducted at a systemic level without including assessments of individuals operating in the field of journalism. Therefore, to fill the gap in personal-level research, the aim of this analysis is to examine the threatening actions that Lithuanian journalists personally experience in their professional activities. This will be achieved by answering the following research questions:

- 1) How often do journalists experience physical and psychological professional threats?
- 2) How are the professional threats experienced by journalists quantitatively distributed between female and male journalists, journalists of different age groups, national and local/regional media, private commercial and public media?
- 3) Is there a correlation between the unsafe actions experienced by journalists in their work and a) the frequency of stress and b) concern about physical and psychological well-being?
- 4) Is there a correlation between the frequency and intensity of threats experienced by journalists and the application of self-censorship in their professional activities?

The implementation of the research objective and answering of the research questions were based on the data obtained from a representative survey of Lithuanian journalists conducted between October 2022 and February 2023. The article was prepared as part of Project No. S-MIP-22-19 'Lithuanian Journalism in the Contexts of Political, Economic and Social Risks' (2022–2024) funded by the Research Council of Lithuania.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Buzan (2007: 50) categorises security at the individual level into objective and subjective security, emphasising that the subjective sense of security is not necessarily related to objective security, i.e. a person can feel unsafe in an objectively safe environment and vice versa. This distinction is useful in avoiding treating security as an objective given and highlighting that 'actors define security and, in this sense, security is subjective' (Buzan et al. 1998: 31). However, the term 'subjective', as noted by authors, is not entirely appropriate because 'security is not what individuals decide for themselves', as it is a socially constructed perception (ibid.). The understanding of subjective security as a social construct is particularly well supported by many researchers of subjective security, who argue that subjective security in this area depends on geopolitical, economic, health, age, ethnic, gender, religious, and other factors (Inglehart, Norris 2012; Stampnitzky, Mattson 2015; Janušauskienė et al. 2017; Gečienė-Janulionė 2018; Valente, Valera Pertegas 2018; UNDP 2022).

Slavtcheva-Petkova et al. (2023) have developed a conceptual model of journalistic safety in which social, organisational and individual risk factors pose threats to professional safety (physical, psychological, digital and financial). Following this model, the reaction (stress) to the emerged insecurity is either handled appropriately or inappropriately. Appropriate handling is oriented towards problem-solving by developing resilience, which results in resistance. Inappropriate handling involves a certain acceptance of a threatening situation, and self-censorship, leading partly to resignation or leaving the profession. Self-censorship is conceptualised as actions that limit journalistic expression to avoid scrutiny or disfavour by owners, clients and sources (McQuail, Deuze 2020).

When examining the issue of journalists' safety at work, Westlund et al. (2022) introduced the concept of 'newsafety', which consists of three sub-dimensions: 1) safety and infrastructure, 2) safety and practice, and 3) safety and consequences. The safety and infrastructure sub-dimension encompasses the technological aspect of information security for journalists, such as how digital technologies can be used to protect information related to a journalist's work and personal life. The safety and practice sub-dimension discusses how journalist safety in practice affects the news production process, how it affects the quality of news content, and whether journalists engage in self-censorship by avoiding specific topics or aspects and presenting biased or limited information. Finally, the safety and consequences of sub-dimension encompass the psychological, social and political consequences of the challenges faced by journalist safety and how they can affect the democratic process in society.

The sense of security among journalists and the measures taken to ensure it depends on the situation in the country, the attitudes of different societal groups towards journalists, the organisational environment, and the preparedness to manage risks (Garces-Prettel et al. 2020). Tragic events in the field of journalism usually lead to changes in both organisational and personal attitudes towards journalists' safety. For example, following the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in Slovakia in 2018, investigative journalists in the country fundamentally changed their approach to security: various online and offline security measures were adapted at both organisational and individual levels (Urbániková, Haniková 2022). So, the factors determining the psychological and physical threats to journalists largely depend on the extent to which they play the role of a 'watchdog'. Journalists who engage in clientelistic relationships are less likely to experience psychological or physical threats (Garcés, Arroyave 2017; Hughes, Márquez-Ramírez 2018; Hamada 2022). This was demonstrated by a study of journalist safety in Bangladesh, where journalists compromise on the objectivity of

their news reporting to remain safe, engaging in self-censorship and avoiding critical reporting of government actions (Hasan, Wadud 2020).

When it comes to journalist safety among different social groups, it is worth noting that women, racial, religious, ethnic and sexual minorities are more likely to experience various threats while working as journalists (Waisbord 2022). Hostile attacks against women journalists even include sexual violence (Chen et al. 2020). In addition, differences in journalist safety are also generated by their status in the country's media system. For example, local journalists in the Philippines are physically, psychologically and financially more vulnerable to their colleagues from national organisations who come to the province to cover events (Høiby 2020).

Therefore, the problematic question arises as to how much the safety of journalists from various backgrounds is an issue in the professional field of Lithuanian journalists, which, according to the Reporters Without Borders (2022) assessment, operated in one of the world's most favourable environments for press freedom in 2021 (Lithuania ranked 9th in this indicator). In response to the research questions raised in the introduction, the following article examines the professional threats experienced by Lithuanian journalists.

METHODOLOGY

When forming the sample of respondents, the first step was to calculate how many journalists work in Lithuania's national, regional and local media (television channels, news websites, radio stations, newspapers, magazines, and news agencies). When calculating the number of journalists in Lithuania, media organisations that generate journalistic content were included (for example, employees of radio stations that only play music were not included in the sample). The survey sample included journalists who work at least half of their time on journalistic work or receive at least half of their income from journalistic activity. Based on the public information provided by media organisations about their employees (contact lists on websites, metrics in magazines or newspapers) and by submitting requests to media organisations, the general population of Lithuanian journalists was estimated to be 1,220 journalists. Using proportional stratified systematic random sampling, newsrooms were then selected, and journalists were selected for the survey using systematic random sampling. The methodology of the World of Journalism Study network, which organises the survey of journalists in more than 100 countries in 2021–2023, was used in forming the sample of respondents and conducting the survey of journalists (WJS 2023). A total of 302 journalists were surveyed, with a maximum error margin of 4.9%. The response rate was 54%. Respondents were interviewed by phone, video call, face-to-face, or by submitting completed questionnaires via email. 189 (62.6%) women and 113 (37.4%) men were interviewed. 92 (30.5%) respondents worked in regional/local, 202 (66.9%) in national media and 8 (2.6%) in transnational media or in several different media. 108 (35.8%) of respondents were up to 35 y. o., 102 (33.8%) 36–50 y. o. and 90 (29.8%) were from 51 y. o. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data. χ^2 criterion and correlation analysis (Pearson correlation coefficients) were used to compare the respective groups.

RESULTS

To achieve the goal set in the study, respondents were asked the following question: 'In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist?' The actions listed included those related to psychological violence (such as

demeaning or hateful speech, questioning of personal morality, etc.), legal actions because of work, arrest, detention, imprisonment, physical attacks, sexual assault/harassment, etc. (Table 1). This is the strongest form of asking about subjective safety because it asks not about the perceived threat of experiencing these actions but how often they have been experienced.

The survey results showed that almost four-fifths (79.8%) of Lithuanian journalists had experienced safety incidents related to their journalistic work, either more or less frequently, over the past five years. The most common incidents experienced by journalists were demeaning or hateful speech (70.2%), public discrediting of their work (56.3%), questioning of their personal morality (48.3%), other threats or intimidation (40.1%), and legal actions taken against them because of their work (25.5%). It should be noted that most journalists said they experienced these actions rarely or sometimes, while fewer journalists said they experienced them often or very often. In terms of higher frequency (often or very often), only three unsafe actions related to psychological violence stand out more: demeaning or hateful speech (12.9%), public discrediting of work (9%) and questioning of personal morality (7.3%).

When examining the distribution of threats experienced by journalists by gender, it can be noted that male journalists more often than female journalists reported experiencing public discrediting of work ($p = 0.001$), other threats or intimidation ($p = 0.001$), stalking ($p = 0.003$),

Table 1. The frequency of unsafe actions experienced by Lithuanian journalists, %

Action	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often
Demeaning or hateful speech	29.8	29.1	28.1	10.3	2.6
Public discrediting of work	43.7	28.5	18.9	7.3	1.7
Surveillance	90.7	6.7	2.0	0.7	0
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts/websites	87.4	9.9	2.0	0.7	0
Arrests, detentions, or imprisonment	99.3	0.3	0.3	0	0
Legal actions because of work	74.5	12.9	8.3	3.6	0.7
Stalking	87.1	7.3	3.3	2.0	0.3
Other threats or intimidation	59.9	25.5	10.6	3.0	1.0
Sexual assault/harassment	92.4	7.0	0.7	0	0
Other physical attacks	94.7	3.6	1.0	0.3	0.3
Coercion	87.7	9.9	2.3	0	0
Questioning of personal morality	51.7	26.8	14.2	5.6	1.7
Others using byline for fabricated/manipulated stories	81.7	11.6	5.0	1.0	0.7
Others disseminating personal information	79.8	14.6	4.3	1.0	0.3
Workplace bullying	85.4	8.9	4.0	1.3	0.3
Abductions	99.3	0.3	0.3	0	0
Office raids or seizures/damage equipment	99.3	0.3	0	0	0.3
Intimidation that targets family	95.4	2.0	2.0	0.7	0

Source: data of the survey.

and having personal information disseminated by others ($p = 0.029$). On the other hand, female journalists more often reported experiencing sexual assault/harassment ($p = 0.001$). Overall, when comparing the number and frequency of incidents experienced, male journalists face different threats more often than female journalists.

The type of media outlet that a journalist works for (regional/local, or national) is also an essential factor influencing the experience of safety incidents. Journalists working for regional or local media outlets experience a higher number of different unsafe actions ($p = 0.00$) than journalists working for national media outlets. Journalists working for regional or local media outlets more frequently reported experiencing demeaning or hateful speech ($p = 0.05$), public discrediting of work ($p = 0.03$), other threats or intimidation ($p = 0.00$), legal actions taken against them because of their work ($p = 0.009$), and stalking ($p = 0.047$). However, no differences were found in the frequency of incidents experienced between commercial private and public media outlets.

The research data show that the age of journalists is not as important in determining the experience of threatening actions as gender or media coverage (regional/local, or national). Both older and younger journalists experience different unsafe actions with a similar intensity. The only noticeable difference is that older journalists (from 51 years old), less often than their younger colleagues, reported experiencing demeaning or hateful speech ($p = 0.037$) and questioning of personal morality ($p = 0.000$).

It is important to note that the insecurity experienced by journalists may be related to their work-related stress, mental and physical well-being. According to survey data (the question was the following: In the last six months, how often have you felt stressed out in your work as a journalist?), 43.4% of the participating journalists often or very often experience stress. 26.8% agreed or strongly agreed that they were concerned about their emotional and mental well-being, while 25.5% were concerned about their physical well-being (Table 2).

It can be stated that there is a statistically significant relationship between journalists' experiences of insecurity and their experience of stress while working as a journalist, as well as their concern for physical and emotional/mental well-being. As seen in Table 3, there is a correlation between the experience of work-related stress, concern for emotional/mental and physical well-being, and the frequency and intensity of experienced insecurity. The more journalists reported experiencing different types of unsafe actions and the more intense their experiences were, the more often they reported experiencing stress while working and agreeing with the statement that they are concerned about their emotional and mental well-being. The analysis shows a stronger relationship between concern for emotional/mental well-being than for physical well-being and experiencing unsafe actions.

Table 2. Statement by Lithuanian journalists regarding their concern for their physical, emotional and mental wellbeing, %

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I am concerned about my physical wellbeing	33.4	20.9	20.2	21.9	3.6
I am concerned about my emotional and mental wellbeing	27.5	23.5	22.2	23.2	3.6

Source: data of the survey.

Table 3. Correlation between experienced stress, physical and emotional/mental well-being, and the frequency and intensity of experienced unsafe actions

	Experience of unsafe actions: any	Experience of unsafe actions: intensity
Felt stressed out in work	,263**	,250**
Concerned about physical well-being	,148*	,125*
Concerned about emotional and mental well-being	,159**	,164**

Pearson Correlation, significance level: ** $p <= 0.01$; * $p <= 0.05$;

Source: data of the survey, authors' calculations.

During the surveys, 26.2% of Lithuanian journalists claimed to have engaged in self-censorship in the past five years to protect themselves. The study found a statistically significant correlation between the use of self-censorship and the frequency and intensity of experienced unsafe actions. The more different types of unsafe actions journalists reported experiencing, the more they stated that they were inclined to apply self-censorship in their work ($r = .201$, $p = 0.000$). The same can be said about the intensity of the experienced actions and the applied self-censorship: the more intense the unsafe actions were, the more often journalists reported applying self-censorship to protect themselves ($r = .191$, $p = 0.000$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Although physical attacks against Lithuanian journalists are quite rare, psychological threats related to the profession are relatively frequent, sometimes affecting journalists' family members as well. By emphasising psychological rather than physical threats, it is possible to observe a certain analogy between Lithuanian journalism safety and that of Western countries. However, comparing the results of our study with a study of Swedish journalists conducted several years ago (Nilsson, Örnebring 2016), it is worth noting that psychological aggression against Lithuanian journalists was recorded almost twice as often as against Swedish journalists. The quantity and variety of threats experienced by Lithuanian journalists indicate that journalism in Lithuania is a profession in which safe activities cannot be guaranteed in many cases.

Although many previous studies have found that women experience more threats while working in journalism than men (Waisbord 2022), our study revealed that male journalists face different threats more often than women, except for sexual assault/harassment, which Chen et al. (2020) also distinguishes in relation to female journalists. The study results show that older journalists, due to their professional activities, encounter demeaning/hateful speech and questioning of personal morality actions (which mainly occur online) less frequently than their younger colleagues. This is correlated with the fact that younger Lithuanian journalists create content for online portals more often than older ones and use social media more frequently to gather material for their publications and promote their content. Therefore, by actively communicating online (on social media), they are more likely to encounter psychological aggression on those platforms.

Answering the question of how the professional threats experienced by journalists are quantitatively distributed between national and regional/local media, we can conclude that journalists working in regional or local media outlets experience more diverse forms of insecurity than journalists working in national media outlets. These results show that

in Lithuania, the situation is similar to that in, for example, the Philippines (Høiby 2020), where regional or local journalists are more vulnerable than their colleagues from national media outlets. This could be related to the fact that journalists working for local or regional media outlets are more exposed to their local community, and more information is known about their personal lives, workplace, and family members. On the other hand, the fact that there were no differences found in the frequency of work-related threats between commercial private and public media outlets in the study shows that despite different ownership structures of media organisations, all journalists operate in the same field of threats, which has two levels: national and regional/local.

According to the Slavtcheva-Petkova et al. (2023) conceptual model of journalistic safety, professional safety threats cause stress to journalists. Our findings show a statistically significant correlation between the unsafe actions experienced by journalists and the stress that they experience while working as journalists. Additionally, the study results indicate a significant correlation between experienced unsafe actions and journalists, concerns about their emotional/mental and physical well-being. Journalists who experience various professional threats may not always be able to protect themselves and resist various pressures. In cases of inadequate coping with stressful situations, one of the possible outcomes is the reduction of professional principles and the tendency towards self-censorship, as noted by Westlund et al. (2022) in their discussion of the impact of journalists' safety on news bias (safety and practice sub-dimension).

The study found that more than a quarter of Lithuanian journalists apply the reduction of professional principles (self-censorship) to protect themselves. Moreover, a statistically significant correlation was found between the use of self-censorship and the frequency and intensity of experienced threats. These study results indicate that experienced insecurity significantly undermines important professional attitudes, as self-censorship filters out specific topics and limits the implementation of journalistic principles in professional practice. Furthermore, restricting coverage of specific issues or aspects in the media can negatively affect democratic processes, as the public lacks the comprehensive information needed to make informed decisions. This is especially important in some municipalities, where local journalists experience significantly more safety threats than journalists from national newsrooms.

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Profesinės grėsmės ir savicenzūra Lietuvos žurnalistikoje

Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjami žurnalistų profesinei veiklai grėsmingi veiksmai, kuriuos asmeniškai yra patyrę Lietuvos redakcijų žurnalistai. Pateikta analizė paremta 2022 m. spalio – 2023 m. vasario mėn. atlikta reprezentatyvia Lietuvos žurnalistų apklausa ($N = 302$). Tyrimas atskleidė, kad fiziniai išpuoliai prieš Lietuvos žurnalistus yra gana reti, tačiau su profesija susijusios psichologinės grėsmės yra palyginti dažnos. Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad vyrai žurnalistai dažniau susiduria su skirtingomis grėsmėmis nei žurnalistės moterys, o žurnalistai, dirbantys regioninėje ar vietinėje žiniasklaidoje patiria daugiau skirtingų nesaugumo veikslių palyginti su žurnalistais, dirbančiais nacionalinėje žiniasklaidoje. Tačiau žurnalistų profesinių grėsmių dažnumo atžvilgiu nebuvo rasta skirtumų tarp komercinės privačios ir visuomeninės žiniasklaidos. Gauti rezultatai rodo statistiškai reikšmingą ryšį tarp žurnalistų patiriamų nesaugumo veikslių ir žurnalistų patiriamų streso dirbant žurnalistinį darbą. Taip pat tyrimo rezultatai indikuoja reikšmingą ryšį tarp patiriamų nesaugumo veikslių ir žurnalistų susirūpinimo psichologine ir fizine savijauta. Analizėje nustatytas statistiškai reikšmingas ryšys tarp žurnalistų naudojamos savicenzūros ir patiriamų profesinių grėsmių dažnio ir intensyvumo. Straipsnis parengtas vykdant Lietuvos mokslo tarybos finansuojamą projektą Nr. S-MIP-22-19 „Lietuvos žurnalistika politinių, ekonominių ir socialinių rizikų kontekstuose“ (2022–2024 m.).

Raktažodžiai: žurnalistai, žiniasklaida, profesinės grėsmės, saugumas, savicenzūra