KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG
MEDIA PROGRAMME SEE

Why we tell stories
Reports by journalists from Southeast Europe

www.kas.de

Imprint

Published by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
Media Programme South East Europe

Bul. Yanko Sakazov 19, Et. 1, Ap. 2
1504 Sofia
Bulgaria
Telephone: +359 2 942 49 71
E-Mail: media.europe@kas.de
https://www.kas.de/en/web/medien-europa/home
Facebook: @KASMediaEurope
Instagram: @media.programme.see
LinkedIn: KAS Media Programme SEE
X: @KASmediaSEE

ISBN: 978-3-98574-341-4 (print)
978-3-98574-342-1 (e-book)

Edited by: Christoph Plate, Iveta Tomeva, Ralitsa Stoycheva, Sofia, Bulgaria
Cover design and illustrations: Wynona Mutisi, Harare, Zimbabwe
Proofreader: Bruce Conradie, Johannesburg, South Africa
Layout and design: Velin Saramov, Sofia, Bulgaria
Print: IFO Design, Sofia, Bulgaria

Table of Contents

Preface

Christoph Plate, Sofia, Bulgaria

When you hear about the lives and living conditions of many journalists in the Balkans, you wonder why they are still in that profession. They work odd hours. They are looked down upon by a section of society and, of course, by populists. Most receive meagre pay, which compared to Western Europe is often ridiculously low, and in some cases is not even guaranteed to come at the end of the month.

They live in European countries. Some of these are members of the EU and NATO. Most of these countries have embraced the principle of the separation of powers. This ideal was promised more than 30 years ago, after the Berlin Wall fell and communism subsided as a system of oppression. Hopes were high then, just like the expectations for a democracy that would respect the will of the people, not only that of the ruling party.

Glorious years were expected: Western media houses invested heavily in the Balkans and beyond. However, with the rise of digital services and social networks, the behaviour of media consumers also changed and had an effect on the financial stability of many media houses. With limited resources came fewer staff members and increased pressure on the remaining people in the newsrooms. Subsequently, mistakes occurred, and there have been cases of corruption. The effect was a loss of reputation for the media.

Yet, there are thousands out there who are doing what they think is necessary: asking questions, analysing documents and data, organising public debates, editing opinion pieces. We asked 17 journalists in twelve countries in South East Europe and beyond to write personal testimonies about why they are in journalism in these difficult times. These are media people of all ages and backgrounds, young budding writers, grey-haired seniors, war correspondents, television anchors and photographers.

It seemed we had raised a question that many of them had been deliberating over but not addressed in public. They might speak to friends, colleagues and loved ones about their fears and challenges, but not to a general audience, as if this could look vain or self-centred. In the sheltered company of being with others, invited by KAS Media South East Europe, they were prepared to share their stories. Many of these are extremely touching, from photographing Russian atrocities in Georgia to thoroughly preparing for an interview with a difficult star in Serbia, they all show a commitment to telling what is. What transpires also is the knowledge and the wisdom of the generations before them that endured a time when it was impossible to say what is, unless it pleased the communist rulers.

When KAS Media SEE offers scholarships to media students, the selection committee is often highly impressed by the young people, predominantly female, who apply and want to become journalists, against all odds and sometimes despite their parents' and peers' doubts about a career in journalism.

An answer as to what keeps them going was recently given at a conference of ours by a Kosovoran television journalist in Pristina. She and her colleagues had not been paid in months and she found it hard as a mother to make ends meet. Yet,

she said, “What keeps us going is the idea that we are doing something right.”

Allow yourself to be inspired by writers who chose to be journalists and who have a story to tell.

Christoph Plate

KAS Media Programme South East Europe

Sofia, Bulgaria, February 2026

I always knew it

Božidar Milovac, Novi Sad, Serbia

In the last month, I took almost as many deep breaths of tear gas as I did of fresh air. I have been insulted and threatened. I have had my phone taken away by a police officer merely for filming and, while I got it back, I am well aware it would be pointless trying to pursue this clear abuse of power in court.

And the only regret I have from that last month is that I missed some of it.

Now this situation is specific. It does not happen often that you get a non-official state of emergency that lasts for more than ten months. It does not happen often that police officers turn a blind eye to the clearly illegal and dangerous activities of pro-government activists, while arresting and beating up protesters for saying something slightly wrong. It does not happen often that the government treats free and independent media as public enemies. Not often, except for that last one; that last happens often.

While the situation in Serbia, and perhaps especially in Novi Sad, has been tumultuous and will continue to be until it is resolved, presumably via snap elections, and while again we are living in a state of emergency throughout this period, the lives of journalists will not change as much as they will for everyone else.

Of course, we are not used to being on the front lines and we are not used to seeing as much violence and brutality as we have seen daily in the last few months. However, we are used to the pressure. We are used to the expectations. We are used to being wherever there is something happening at all times. We are used to working overtime when necessary.

So, getting asked "Why Journalism?" brings you back to reality, because there is not a single rational response to this question.

It is so bad that I rarely hear great journalists say that, when they were young, they dreamed of working in the media. I certainly did not. It is something that you must find for yourself. You must be young enough to still believe in a better world, and old enough to find a path to creating that better world. That is when you can best see what media can truly be, despite the problems.

And that perception that you have when you are young, or rather the lack of perception, the almost non-existent possibility of wanting to become a journalist is a result of a world that no longer believes the media can change the world and that believes the life of a journalist is a constant struggle. They are not wrong.

The salaries are dismal. The work-life balance is non-existent. Working hours are never under your control. The conditions are just as bad. The consequences for your mental health are unimaginable. You never stop working. You never stop thinking about it. You never even get a real day off, because, when you do, you are still in that world.

You know, first-hand, how bad the situation is in multiple, if not all, spheres of your society. You know how hard people have it and you also know that, no matter how hard you try, you can never help them all.

You can see how journalists have less and less space to manoeuvre, how politicians and businessmen see the media as one of the last barriers to controlling everything, and how they are trying to destroy journalism as an idea and as a concept. Regular people do not even see this as an issue. They think that all journalists are the same and they agree with the politicians and the businessmen that the media are unnecessary.

You can see how the world is sinking in an ocean of disinformation, and you know you cannot save it, nor do you even know whether the world wants to be saved.

Because of all of this, the question again looms over everything we do. While there is no rational response to the question "Why Journalism?", that does not mean that there is no response at all.

It is completely irrational. It could even be thought of as foolish but I would never put this question to myself, not because I do not think about it, but because to me it is a given. It is a given that I love journalism in the most irrational, idealistic, and honest way possible. It is a given that I love the idea of being the eyes and the ears of the world. I love the idea of always being on the side of the truth. I love that we are the watchdogs. I love the role of the media being the watchdog of the rule of law, the watchdog of democracy, and the watchdog of freedom.

Across the globe, we are united, not because we have the same beliefs, or the same pasts or presents, but because we understand the position we are in better than anyone else could. From Washington to Moscow, from Belgrade and Novi Sad to Zagreb and Sarajevo, from Tbilisi to Ankara, from East Jerusalem or Gaza to Kabul, we understand each other.

We choose daily to live in an irrational and idealistic world. We believe in that world more than anyone else and we always work in it. More importantly, if that world were ever to happen, we would still be there. We will still be there, every day, to watch over that world. If the world crumbles around us, we will still be there, to watch over it. No matter what happens, just know that we will be there, in the front lines. We are the irrational answer to a rational question.

Bringing the world home

Kristina Atovska, Skopje, North Macedonia

Journalists are often called to talk about why journalism is important for democracy, society, and the world, but they are rarely asked why journalism means so much to them. It seems we are programmed to tell other people's stories, but not our own. I am glad I have finally been asked to tell my story.

As a child, I imagined myself talking into a microphone while things were happening around me. I watched world news and, although I did not understand a word, I was fascinated by journalists reporting from war zones or protests. I knew that one day I was going to be that girl in the trench with a helmet and a microphone. No other profession ever crossed my mind. So, I began to learn about it, to read about journalism, politics, law, psychology, economics and all the sciences I thought I needed to know to be a journalist.

When I started my journalism studies, I fell in love with journalism even more. I realised that journalism is not a profession; it is a calling. I followed my calling without an illusion that it was going to be easy. When I spoke with my colleagues about reporting from hostile environments, they told me to forget it because the Macedonian media sector would never develop the section "war reporting" or invest in producing that kind of content.

If you live in Macedonia, now North Macedonia, you grow up aware of the malfunctions of your society. Corruption, politicisation and nepotism are present in almost every institution, and unfortunately this includes the media. When I got my first job in one of the national television stations, "not easy" became "impossible". All the professional standards and methods we learned became just theories in textbooks. I was shocked and even more determined to fight for what journalism should be: a corrector of the government's mistakes, a voice of the unheard, and a social compass.

From day one, I worked by the book. I said no to editors when they had political demands, fought with them not to cut my findings on corruption, and asked too many questions at press conferences. It cost me a great deal of nervous stress, legal fights, headaches, and finally, my job.

In 2015/2016, Macedonian society was in a political and societal crisis. There were protests every day and the opposition started publishing wiretapped phone conversations between government officials that revealed criminal acts. Then, as my former editors would say, I "dared" to publish a column criticising our Minister of Internal Affairs, whom we heard was trying to conceal the murder of a young supporter of her political party by a member of the Prime Minister's security unit at a party celebration.

The Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers asked me if I wanted to go public and I said yes. Many colleagues told me not to do that because it was dangerous. I did it anyway. Many said I was reckless. I believe I was simply honest. The union organised a press conference, and we informed the public about my case so they could see what was happening in the media when they criticised government officials. After that, both threats and job offers started coming my way.

I decided to work at the television station considered independent and critical towards the government. The station was one of the few courageous enough to criticise the government, and, of course, it offered the lowest salaries. I did not mind the salary. I was happy with the freedom. For the first time I was able to research, ask the right questions, and publish my findings without constant verbal fights with editors and "warnings" of termination of employment. For two years, I reported on the protests and political events. I often put myself between demonstrators and the police, or between two groups of demonstrators, just to capture footage of what was happening when there was a clash between them. The polarisation of society and the propaganda were so strong that we needed every piece of evidence of the truth we could get. There were physical attacks on journalists and cameramen and constant cyber threats, but that did not stop us from reporting on injustice, corruption and violence.

People started to trust journalists again. Civil society awakened. There was a glimpse of hope for journalism and freedom of speech. There were changes in our society and a change of government followed. A new period began in Macedonian politics. The new government reached an agreement with Greece to change the name of the country in order to unblock our path to joining the EU. That decision also brought violent protest and even violent entrance into the Macedonian Parliament. Luckily, the rage did not escalate into civil conflict.

Things began to settle and, with that, hope faded. The country received another veto from another neighbour, and it was clear that we were blocked from joining the EU again. We all knew that it takes a longtime to solve bilateral issues before moving towards joining the EU. The new government did not solve the biggest problems of our society: corruption, the justice system, healthcare, education, politicisation, and so on.

People lost the hope that things could change for the better. The only improvement the new government made was greater transparency, which made our work easier because we could access documents and prove corruption. Nevertheless, political influence on the media remained, only using different methods.

There was a change of editors at my station, and freedom was slowly eroded. I remembered the advice a former director gave me when I started working there: "In your career, the people you must be most aware of are your editors." He was right.

My biggest problem came when I published my nine-month investigation into corruption in the social services with the process of the adoption of children. People working in the social services asked for bribe in order to complete the process of adoption. Process that is completely free of charge in North Macedonia. Many people were involved: not just social workers, but also doctors, prosecutors, and judges. The telephones started ringing. Threats came from everywhere. My editors blocked the follow-up story, which only encouraged the perpetrators. I received threatening phone calls and messages and black cars waited in front of my house. I was forced to hire private security because I feared, not for myself, but for the people I love. I alerted the Association of Journalists. They reported my case in their annual report and pressured my editors not to fire me. One very brave prosecutor opened an investigation based on my story, and the threats to me decreased, shifting instead to her. My job was secured, but the truth was not. Only one editor was willing to cover my follow-up story, but it was not enough. I could not stand the censorship; so I left.

I moved to a newly opened television station and, before signing, negotiated my freedom. I have never negotiated salary; it has always been about freedom. For two years, I freely covered

all kinds of stories, reported on important events, reported at protests in neighbouring countries, anchored news, and conducted interviews with no pressure. The editorial policy was unique and you could see that because my colleagues and I did not always share opinions and we were able to express our views to the public. It did not last more than two years. One sunny day, while on holiday abroad, I got a call from a colleague asking, do you see what is happening? The owner of the television station had been arrested on criminal charges. A businessman, a special prosecutor and few government officials were involved. The government was shaking. Soon after, the station closed. Only time will reveal the whole truth behind that scandal.

After the closure, some of us were not ready to return to traditional media, where the same problems awaited. One editor had the idea of establishing an online political show, four and a half hours of live programming, setting the daily agenda. He took the responsibility for finances and salaries. We were a small, but competent and dedicated team of journalists producing around a dozen interviews daily. It quickly became popular, especially during the Covid pandemic. The whole world was in panic, but we took precautions and felt safe while working.

When the pandemic drama was over, a new challenge came my way: the war against Ukraine. The day Russia invaded Ukraine, I told my editor I had to go there. That was a difficult week of negotiations with him. The problem was we were a small media outlet with no finances for that kind of reporting. The general problem in my country was that we had no tradition of war reporting, and nobody wanted to hear about such a thing, not even the public broadcaster. The reasons were numerous. I had two hard weeks of convincing everyone that we had to be present on the ground, because it was a war on European soil. It was in vain. After two weeks of insisting, my friends simply lent me the

money I needed to leave for Ukraine. I made the preparations, received the necessary accreditations, and, when everything was finally set for departure, my cameraman, who had wanted this assignment so much, informed me that he was not coming. So, I went there alone.

My first stop was Lviv. Many people fleeing from the east told me, "You have to go to Kharkiv". That set my mind on it. But first, I had to get to Kyiv and from there to plan my trip to Kharkiv. I entered Kyiv while it was still surrounded and visited Bucha one day after the withdrawal of the Russian forces. The massacre I saw there was beyond anyone's imagination. I could not believe my eyes. After that, I moved to Kharkiv and went to the front line in the Izyum region. I saw death, destruction, and cruelty, but also courage, willpower, and heroism. I faced many life-threatening situations. The thought "we are not going to make it" crossed my mind twice, but I never doubted my decision to go there. The hope I saw in people's eyes when they spoke to journalists made the risks worthwhile. For the first time, I felt that everyone around me was grateful for the work journalists were doing. That was a rare feeling, considering the fact that, in my country, trust in journalists and in the judiciary was very low.

When I came back, the first question people asked me was, "Was it worth it?" My answer will always be the same: it was more than worth it. I understand why people asked this question. I was the only Macedonian reporter in Ukraine, and yet people in my country were not very interested in the topic. Besides, while reporting from Ukraine, I spent far more than I earned. So, from their point of view, the question was logical.

I focused on my work as always and, because I had many stories left untold, I made a documentary film. Unlike North Macedonia, the world was interested in stories from Ukraine. The film,

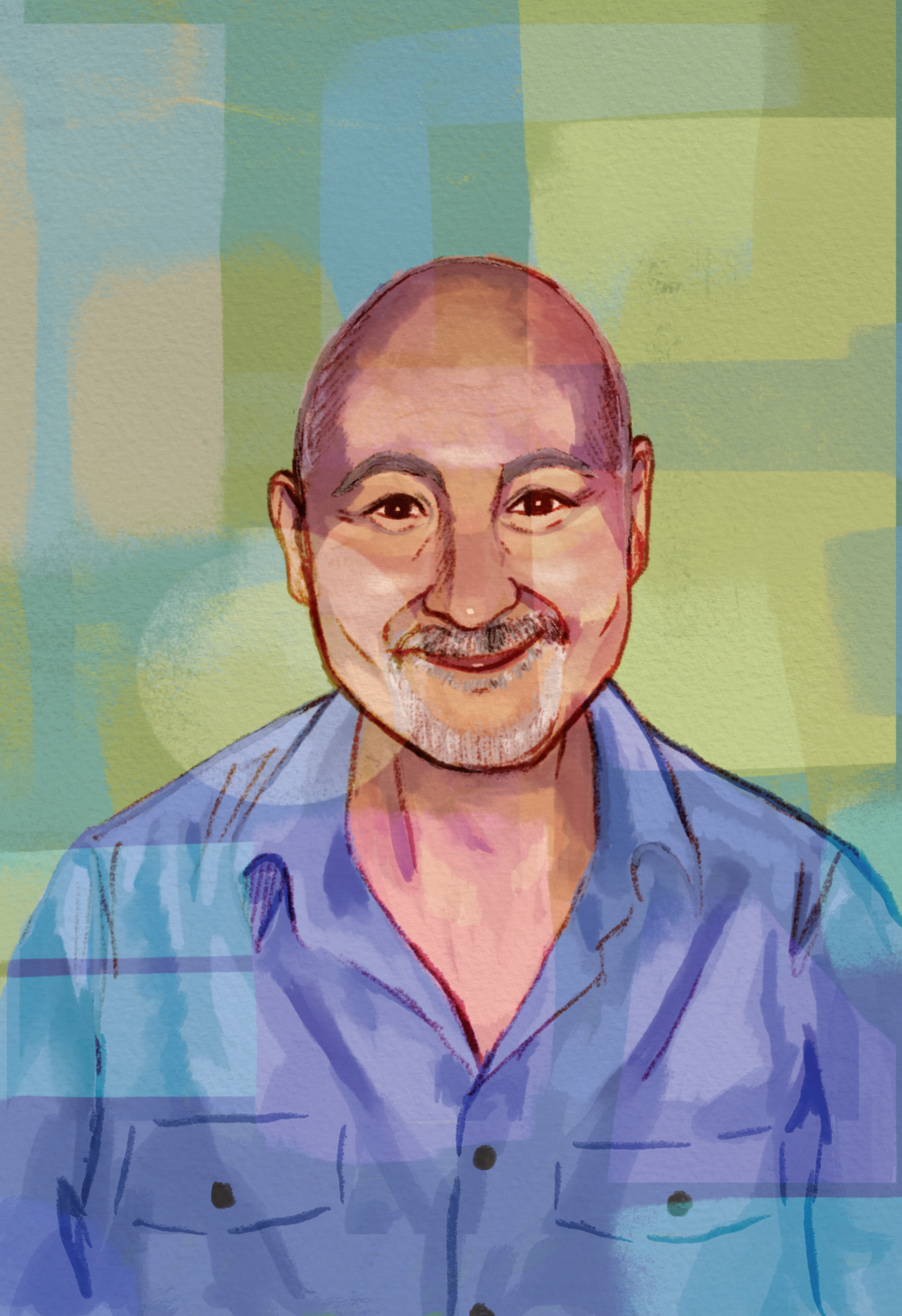
titled Siren Lullabies, was screened at over 30 international film festivals and received 13 awards. Meanwhile, at home, my work from Ukraine was recognised by my colleagues and I received two journalism awards. So, I finally proved my point: everything is possible if you work hard for it. Yes, Macedonian journalism can reach the level of professionalism seen in Western European countries.

When I came back, I faced another media closing. The media environment was so fragile that it was really hard to maintain income. I went fully independent. My friend and I established a film production company. We expanded by adding a media web page, focused only on authentic video content. I now run a foreign policy show. Now I work in journalism only out of love and make a living from the film production company. Financially, we have good months and bad months, but I wake up happy every morning, knowing that I have no limitations in doing what I love.

So, apart from the principles you are taught in journalism studies, journalism is much more than that. It is the curiosity to dive beyond the surface of meaningless information and to reveal something hidden. It is the excitement when you are a few seconds away from your live reporting when stones, firecrackers and even rockets and missiles are flying over your head. It is the need to tell people that they are being robbed or manipulated. It is the need to tell the story of a mother who lost her child because of injustice, the need to be out between people when they fight for their rights. It is the urge to put your jeans on at 3 am when a plane crashes or when a hospital burns down. It is the urge to grab your passport and leave when a former Prime Minister escapes the country or a war breaks out on your continent. It is a passion, a character, a drive, a calling, a way of life. It is not something we do; it is something we are. Definitely not just a profession.

My answer to the question why journalism? Because every day you meet new people and go to different places. Because you cannot keep yourself away when people stand up in front of injustice. Because you feel there is nothing more important than the truth. Because even the smallest change you cause makes you feel you are changing the world. Because you need to know that you helped at least one person today or brought him a spark of hope in his eyes. Because the feelings you get when somebody genuinely says "thank you" are priceless. Because you come home exhausted and yet you feel only the satisfaction of doing something meaningful. Because there is no greater privilege than to hold a microphone between power and the people. Because no other profession at the end of every day can make you say, "What a day!"

Yes, it takes nerves, sleepless nights, threats, sometimes attacks, legal fights, facing hate and distrust, not being paid nearly enough and, yet, these experiences make us the richest people alive.



How the Rolling Stones made me a journalist

Andrey Vladov, London, United Kingdom

I studied to be a diplomat but ended up being a journalist, something of a career failure in mid-1980s communist Bulgaria! Working in embassies then was a rare chance to travel the world as opposed to doing night shifts in a newsroom and writing about countries behind the Iron Curtain, countries you could only dream of visiting. Nevertheless, I was smiling. I guess I have always wanted to be a journalist - ever since I got my first taste of media adrenaline at the age of five, reciting a poem live on radio in my kindergarten on New Year's Eve.

And, I have always loved telling stories. A later version of me discovered that this was a good way to impress girls, something no less important, as journalism is also about learning to communicate and getting a message across to as big an audience as possible. My first attempt at this was at high school, where I started a handwritten newspaper that I tried to fill up with funny tales of class life - real and imagined ones.

Radio, however, has always been my true passion. I would spend hours listening to Willis Conover's late-night Jazz Hour on the Voice of America or the news on the BBC World Service. Western broadcasts provided an alternative perspective on political developments but also ignited a love for music that was deliciously different and entertaining. It was a glimpse into a then-forbidden world that was obviously better than the one in which

we lived in, if it could create something as beautiful as a Rolling Stones song. What amazed me most was how someone sitting in a studio somewhere could touch and influence people living thousands of kilometres away! The power of the media indeed!

Later, as a young Bulgarian National Radio presenter and reporter in the in the years following the 1989 fall of communism in Bulgaria, I realised its true potential and the responsibility that goes with it. Any political comment uttered on air would elicit an emotional audience reaction. If the phones were burning red with listeners both praising and criticising, you knew you had probably got it objectively right.

The flavour of media freedom did not last long. Come 1995 and restraints on journalism in Bulgaria had started to creep back, imposed by political parties in power and shady business interests. By then, I had joined the BBC and was shocked to see something that I thought had been buried in the past - attempts by the authorities in Sofia to censor reporting. A Bulgarian prosecutor general once grabbed and "confiscated" the recording device of a reporter because he did not like the questions he was being asked. In another incident, a government minister on a visit to the UK thought he could get me fired by calling the Foreign Office in London to complain that I had given him a hard time during an interview. He disgraced himself.

Standing up to political bullying may get you into trouble, but it also pays off. Reporting on attempts by a businessman to illegally gain control of a residential complex in a Bulgarian ski resort led to death threats against me and another journalist but resulted in a fair court decision. In the early 2000s, BBC reporting managed to stop a controversial government deal to build a luxury hotel on a green spot in the centre of Sofia.

Journalism is a tough calling, not just because you could be physically threatened. It is also a very demanding job. It is the stress of constantly working against a tight deadline, trying to get a news story out first, and making sure that what you say is correct and verified. As my first editor used to say: “Boy, welcome to a wonderful profession that will never allow you to rest!” Even on holiday on a beach, you can never switch your radio off, he insisted. “News never sleeps!”

The way we consume information may have changed, but I am still constantly “switched on”.

The words of my ex-boss came to haunt me years later, on a Friday evening in June 2023, in a pub in England. I had gone there to relax after a hard day and had just had my first sip of a pint when I got a text message from work. Wagner PMC boss Yevgeny Prigozhin had started his armed mutiny and was marching towards Moscow. No beer for me that evening!

What followed were sleepless nights for me and the whole Russia team at BBC Monitoring, the BBC news division that tracks and analyses global media to help audiences make sense of world events. Initially, some experts were quick to announce that the Wagner revolt signalled the beginning of the end for Putin’s rule. But the information and comment we were seeing coming from Russia painted a different picture: an insurrection by an “independent” mercenary boss whose “private military company” turned out to be on the Kremlin payroll. Something was not right! It turned out that those who predicted a bad end for Prigozhin were closer to the truth, and we would like to think that our reporting helped inform their conclusions. Thankfully, the “doom-and-gloom” stuff - covering coups, wars and other calamities -is just part of a journalist’s job. There is also another, far more pleasant one: It’s called travelling and meeting interesting people!

I have interviewed opposition politicians in Russia but also rock stars like Carlos Santana and Aerosmith while reporting at a music festival in the US. I have recorded a sports podcast with cricket greats in India and was unwittingly caught in an anti-government demonstration in Peru, when looking for cheap cigars in the capital, Lima.

In the 2010s, I was also lucky to witness the positive impact that good journalism can have on people's lives, when I was Executive Editor for BBC Media Action in Ethiopia. The BBC's international charity uses the media for development, training local journalists and providing reliable information on issues such as climate change, sustainable farming and the role of democratic institutions.

Our weekly programmes aimed at improving maternal and child health became the most popular shows on Ethiopian National Radio, drawing a record number of 21-million listeners. Proof that even "boring", half-an-hour-long health programmes can be entertaining if presented in a "funky" way.

The early success of a one-minute public service announcement on the "mundane" topic of how important it is to visit a health centre during pregnancy convinced us we were on the right track. Recorded in the traditional style of an answer-and-response musical duet, it featured a dialogue between a husband and wife who had lost their first baby. The clip, in which the man assures the woman that this time he will support her to deliver in a hospital went viral in Ethiopia. People shares it as a ringtone, and we would hear the melody constantly while walking around the capital, Addis Ababa. Combining reporting with music is a powerful way to reach people with an important message, no matter where in the world you are. In the mid-2000s, I got to test this in Bulgaria, where I headed a BBC campaign to increase

audiences by organising monthly gigs at a Sofia rock club. Dubbed "A Night without Politics", it was aimed at late Millennials who could listen to unsigned bands for free but also go home with BBC leaflets promoting current affairs programmes. The plan worked, and a different interest had been stirred. Six months later, a survey showed that younger listenership of BBC news in the country had jumped by over 6%. I am still proud of that result! I am still happy that I dropped aspirations to be a diplomat all those years ago and went for journalism?

Well, how many other professions would allow you to contribute to positive changes in society, dispel propaganda, try to uncover the truth and help people decide what is right and what is wrong? And have fun along the way! Maybe it was not a bad career move after all!

Being on the right side of history

Barcin Yinanc, Ankara, Türkiye

I became a journalist simply because a friend of mine in high school talked about becoming a journalist. It was 1984 and I was 16. There was only one television channel in Türkiye. By coincidence, Turkish television aired an American television series set in a newsroom. Journalism looked dynamic and cool. I was determined to become a journalist. Actually, I had no idea what journalism involved. At 16, you did not think much about such details. When I started preparing for the university exams so I could enter the Faculty of Press and Information, my parents advised me to study international relations, arguing that job opportunities after graduation could be wider. I am convinced it was the best advice they gave me, because I enjoyed studying international relations, which also helped my professional life.

Do we choose journalism to become rich? While I was preparing to take the university exams, I asked my high school classmates what they would study and why. The male students usually wanted to study computer science or engineering. As to why, the answer was to earn a living or to become rich. My family was neither poor nor rich. As a young girl, I had decided to have a career and earn my own living, but I never dreamt of being rich. To this day, I am convinced that you do not go into journalism to get rich. Wealth should never be the reason you choose this profession.

Studying international relations enabled me to become a diplomatic reporter. You need not study economics to cover economic issues. Nor must you study journalism to become a journalist. Nevertheless, knowledge of history and political science and familiarity with international issues helped my career. As I liked international relations, I enjoyed covering diplomacy. This is critical. It is important to pursue a profession in a field that you like.

I started as an intern in my last year in university in 1990, at the Ankara office of the daily Milliyet, a prominent mainstream newspaper. I continued full-time after graduation in 1991. My salary was very modest. I did not mind because I was lucky to live with my parents, which reduced my costs.

Before I started journalism, there were strong trade unions in Türkiye. However, the beginning of my career coincided with strong pressure from the owners of the media outlets, forcing journalists to resign from trade unions. Experienced journalists succumbed to pressure and resigned from trade unions. We lost the ability to negotiate collectively. That was a big blow, with detrimental consequences for our incomes.

The start of my career coincided with the end of the Cold War. For most European countries, that meant the end of hot conflicts. Türkiye, on the other hand, found itself in the midst of several regional conflicts, among them the Gulf War. As I was trying to advance my career under the shadow of two veteran, experienced diplomatic reporters, this meant new subject areas to cover, opening more room for me.

I was lucky; the Ankara bureau chief who recruited me was dedicated to investing in the younger generation. He encouraged me to go abroad for study visits and included me in Türkiye's official delegations going abroad.

My first professional trip abroad was at the invitation of the German Embassy in Ankara. In 1991, I joined a group of journalists travelling to Germany to observe the process of reunification.

In the first ten years of my career, working as a diplomatic reporter for the daily Milliyet meant working six days a week. It never meant 9 to 6. Sometimes we started very early and finished very late, without receiving overtime pay. I thought long hours were the norm. With the speed of events in Türkiye and in its surroundings, I could not imagine it any other way. In any case, I was working long hours voluntarily. Perhaps I should have taken more time for myself.

Although it was not greatly rewarding salary-wise, it was extremely rewarding in other aspects. I was fascinated by diplomacy. It was exciting to follow behind-the-scenes negotiations among different state and non-state actors. I often had the chance to speak on or off the record to both Turkish and foreign political leaders. That access made me feel I understood events more deeply than the average citizen. It also gave me a subtle, almost narcissistic sense of knowing things earlier and more thoroughly than others.

Conducting interviews with high-level decision-makers, including the UN and NATO secretary generals, leaders like the president of Georgia, or the king of Jordan, gave me a profound sense of privilege.

Although a journalist should not be dominated by his or her emotions, I was passionate about certain issues, like covering Türkiye's journey to the EU. Türkiye was denied candidate status in 1997, while it was granted candidate status two years later. Then accession negotiations started; then it went back to the freezer. All these ups and downs were emotionally charging for diplomatic

reporters. Although these diplomatic developments appeared highly strategic, they directly affected the nation's future.

Being able to ask direct questions of Turkish and foreign politicians and officials, while uncovering stories and scrutinising politicians on behalf of the public, gave me a profound sense of responsibility. I have taken pride in being in a profession that significantly contributes to the well-being of society. I have been contributing to the advancement of values, like the rule of law, fundamental freedom, and human rights.

The best part was that, as a diplomatic reporter, I got to travel a good deal. From Europe to the Middle East, from America to Central Asia, I went to over 30 countries to cover bilateral visits. I also covered numerous NATO, EU summits, and UN summits. These visits expanded my vision.

During these visits, being an eyewitness to history, being in close proximity to history being made—like covering the signing ceremony of the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan in 1994 in the middle of the desert or covering critical elections or referendums like the one in Cyprus in 2004—has been one of the most rewarding and motivating aspects of journalism. From covering the funerals of François Mitterrand or Alia İzzetbegoviç, to attending a private dinner with a US defence minister or a Dutch crown prince, all of these made me feel privileged.

Witnessing history was depressing at times. The successive Turkish governments' lack of appetite to improve the country's human rights record in the 1990s coincided with the most violent years in the fight against separatist terrorism, and the slow pace of democratic reforms was demoralising. Defending values like democratic pluralism, the rule of law, human rights, and peace between nations made me feel I am on the right side of history.

The first ten years of my career were intense. The conventional media had the financial resources to send me abroad to cover regional and international events. However, the end of the 1990s saw economic deterioration in Türkiye. Media outlets started to downsize. Although I have had several job offers from other prominent newspapers, I never thought of going elsewhere. Television opportunities came my way as well, but they did not appeal to me.

When I was fired in 2001 from Milliyet, the very first news outlet at which I worked, I was shocked. That is when I realised one should have a professional approach to their workplace. You see it as part of your family, but you realise the feeling is not always reciprocal. That is how I found myself in a new phase in my career. I became a diplomatic reporter, first for a lesser-known news channel and later for the more prominent CNN Türk.

Working for a news channel was also an adrenaline-driven challenge. Perhaps as a journalist you become addicted to high speed and adrenaline. Making it on time for the news hour, live news coverage, live interviews, and the race against time and competitors make you feel alive.

Let me add an aside. I have had many exclusive stories that made newspaper headlines. On television, I broke many stories ahead of my competitors. The feeling of being the first to hear a scoop—of publishing a breaking news item before anyone else—is exhilarating. Missing a story, however, can be just as painful. At times, it can leave you with a knot in your stomach.

My first years in television journalism coincided with the beginning of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) more than two decades of rule in Türkiye. At that time, it was not clear that, after consolidating power, the party and its leadership would

turn authoritarian. By coincidence, I changed track and moved to İstanbul long before the AKP turned authoritarian.

I was exhausted from doing the same thing. After working as an editor at the headquarters of CNN Türk, I went back to print media, since Turkish Daily News, an English-language outlet, was recently bought by the Doğan group, which also owned CNN Türk.

I worked as the opinion editor, and I also conducted a weekly interview for the newspaper. For at least a decade, my articles were published every Monday, while I also wrote foreign policy commentaries once a week.

Those ten years witnessed the regime turn authoritarian. With each passing year, the space for real journalism shrank. I recall how I had to negotiate with some columnists to soften their tone of criticism. We had to part ways with several of our opinion contributors because of their critical rhetoric. The media group, which had to face several legal and financial challenges, succumbed to pressure and sold all its outlets to a business group that was closer to the government.

The change was like day and night. I could not conduct serious political interviews. I had to choose lighter issues. To avoid politics, I tried to diversify, trying to find other subjects, like the environment, health, and culture. My interviews became dull; my opinion articles were more on international news and less about Türkiye.

Many suggested I should go abroad or work for a foreign news outlet. The option of leaving Türkiye never crossed my mind. My colleagues started to leave Türkiye in the early 2010s, especially after the Gezi Park protests of 2013. The government turned even more oppressive after the 2016 coup attempt. By that time,

80% to 90% of the conventional media were dominated by pro-government outlets.

A new wave of journalists started leaving pro-government outlets, either because they were fired or because they resigned. The job opportunities in the so-called independent or opposition media were limited, as their numbers were only a handful. In addition, their working conditions were extremely difficult, as they faced constant scrutiny from the government's watchdog, which repeatedly imposed fines that drained their financial resources. Few options were available. Many of my colleagues left the profession. Some found jobs as public relations officers in private companies. Some opened cafes or simply retired.

By 2019, working in a pro-government newsroom had become unbearably suffocating. I often thought about resigning, but leaving would have meant giving up my right to a full pension.

In the summer of 2020, I received a telephone call from the office, telling me they wanted to part ways. A tweet I had posted a week before was not appreciated. This was the second time I was being fired. I was surprised, but this time pleasantly so.

I then started to think about how to go on. I had just turned 50. Should I leave journalism and work for the public relations department of a private company or get in touch with an opposition party and work for them? Should I work for a Turkish or international NGO? How about working as a local staff member of an embassy or foreign foundation?

I decided to do what I knew best. I had to continue working as a journalist, but I was not planning to return to reporting. I began writing opinion pieces for a news website, and I still do. I also host a YouTube programme with a young female journalist. She is eager

to learn and I am glad to contribute to her career by sharing my experience.

In the last five years, since I left the conventional media, things have gone from bad to worse. The imprisonment of journalists that started around 2010 has grown broader in scope. Media members are arrested not just for uncovering troubling facts about government failures, but at times merely for sharing a critical remark.

Writing under the constraints of self-censorship is challenging. I focus on presenting facts and well-reasoned analysis, carefully steering clear of language that is aggressive or inflammatory. Despite the limitations, I still believe I provide useful information and insights.

Why do I continue? Maybe the answer is not that heroic: I continue because I do not know what else to do! Maybe the answer is simply that once you get the virus of journalism inside you, it never leaves.

When you choose to be a journalist, you know from day one that this is a challenging job. Life is better when you fight for a cause, which, in my case, is to uphold universal values, like democracy and fundamental freedom.

Do I make a change? Am I impactful? Maybe not. But at least I try. When I go to sleep, although I question whether I do enough, I still have a clear conscience that says at least you are trying to be on the right side.

Things might not get better for journalists. Nevertheless, as the founder of the Turkish Republic, Atatürk, who saved the country from foreign occupation and built a nation state from wreckage, said, “There are no hopeless situations, only hopeless people.”


TVP

Bursting the bubble

Mihail Nesteriuc, Chisinau, Moldova

Why journalism? I have always admired my father. My dad was never indifferent to what was happening around him. While my brother and I were growing up, he created Facebook pages where he posted about the things he did for the benefit of everyone, and where he encouraged others to join initiatives like planting trees, monitoring illegal dumps, and developing local sports.

There were also groups where residents could write about what they were unhappy with in the town or about abuses of power at the local level, which happened often. Without this, the townspeople were used to staying silent, and whenever someone asked the mayor why things were not improving, he would respond, "We will soon find funds and fix everything, for sure." In reality, nothing changed and there was just stagnation. The mayor had been in office since Soviet times. The authorities were used to a silent population.

People did not start posting immediately; more often they approached my father personally, asking him to highlight a particular problem. They knew that this way the information would appear publicly, and others would learn about it. Although there were journalists in our town, my father's Facebook pages became the only real media.

I saw problems in our small town but why were people silent? If they are silent, the authorities have no need to take positive action.

I asked my father: why not turn to journalists? He told me that journalists had everything they needed to publicise issues, but they simply chose not to do so. I was outraged and asked: "But they are journalists, why aren't they doing what they're supposed to do?" He replied: "They're all tied together, the mayor's office, the local council, and the journalists."

At that moment, I was filled with indignation and confusion and, because of this strong sense of injustice, I felt an intense desire to become a journalist. It was the very first time I truly wanted to become one.

I grew up in a Russian-speaking environment in Moldova. This is a country in which roughly 25% of the population belongs to various ethnic minorities and therefore speaks Russian (during the Soviet period, it became customary for ethnic minorities to speak Russian as their native language).

In the 2000s, while I was growing up, most adults watched television that was predominantly Russian. Russian channels were freely available, and Russian television completely outperformed the Moldovan media in entertainment, which was the most popular segment, and in news coverage. Kremlin-backed media had no competitors in the Moldovan market.

Because of this, Kremlin propaganda, which was becoming increasingly assertive, faced no obstacles to influencing the minds and hearts of Moldovans. All major geopolitical events were seen through the perspective of Russian television. This included the war in Georgia, the war in Syria and Russia's involvement in it, and the events of 2014 (the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine).

Since I come from this information bubble, I understand well how it works. Russian television tried to convince Moldovans that they were part of the so-called Russian world. This concept was always presented as the opposite of the Western world. People were told that the West was decaying, and that Holy Rus' was the last bastion against Western decadence. Moldovans were included in this narrative.

For me, this always felt foreign and distant. My grandparents told me how our ancestors were repressed during the communist period. These stories about Stalinist repression worked for me as an antidote to the growing totalitarianism coming from the East, almost like a vaccine against propaganda.

At the same time, I knew many people whose ancestors had suffered from Soviet communist repression, yet still defended the Soviet Union and Putin's Russia. Since childhood, I somehow connected these two state concepts in my mind. Their connection felt natural to me back then. Now I understand that the link between them is far deeper than I once thought. Putin's foreign policy is aimed at restoring what he believes to be the former greatness of the Soviet Union. Behind this ambition, however, lies nothing other than simple fascism.

When I was in the twelfth grade and finishing school, the war against Ukraine began. It was the first month of 2022. One day, a teacher was talking about the basic instinct of all living beings, the instinct to care for their offspring. She shifted the topic in a strange way and said, "You know, there are certain deviations from this." She gave a faint, awkward smile and added, "For example, I no longer speak to my daughter at all."

We looked at her in surprise. Someone asked why this was the case. She replied, "My daughter lives in Europe, and she strongly

supports Ukraine in this war. Because of that, I refuse to speak to her."

At that moment, I felt very sorry for her. Somewhere deep inside I understood that people who are trapped by propaganda are deeply unhappy and that they need support rather than hatred. No one needs hatred, and no one deserves to be hated. Yet, people often say they hate those who hold certain views, including extremist or fascist ones.

However, the only thing that should be hated is fascism itself, not the individuals who adopt it. I believed such people were unhappy and suffering deep inside. Imagine how unhappy that mother must be if she stopped speaking to her own daughter simply because the daughter supports Ukraine, a country that this mother despises.

I know many cases when even the closest family members stopped talking to each other for long periods because they supported different sides of this war.

At school, the most interesting subject for me was debating. Although it was not part of the curriculum, it was a project supported by the United States Embassy. Schools competed in tournaments, and for each tournament the school team had to prepare both the argument in favour of a topic and the argument against it.

I really enjoyed debating, and it was debates that showed me an important thing. When you defend a point of view that you dislike, you begin to truly understand the other side. You can spot subtle flaws in their reasoning. You can look at the world through someone else's eyes, and this helps you understand how to persuade them more effectively. Regarding two topics of debate I

changed my own beliefs, because I heard how my ideas sounded from the outside and how they did not match the basic rules of logic that we were taught while preparing for debates.

When I want to understand a certain position, I watch debates on that topic. Debates with no monopoly on a single opinion help one see the full picture. This is why I believe that the best way to persuade someone is to let them watch a debate where their own viewpoint is represented. If their position is not presented, people will develop a sense of being ignored, a feeling that the truth they believe in is being hidden.

For persuasion, something else is important. Debates allow a person to see their own position as if from the outside and through a slightly different lens. Sometimes this alone is enough for them to realise how mistaken they might be. To change beliefs, it is often enough to step outside the information bubble and look from another angle. Social media algorithms today, especially on YouTube, work in the opposite direction, because they mostly show you content that supports your existing beliefs.

Every physical war begins with an information war. The events of the war against Ukraine show that preparation for it had been taking place intensively through almost the entire post-Soviet period. The annexation of Crimea, for example, happened partly through mass voting. However, such large-scale support for Russia cannot be explained by anything other than a highly effective media campaign that was carried out daily through television in Russian, which Crimeans watched.

In conversations about Crimea and the referendum there, few people mention the referendum in Gagauzia, a region of Moldova. It took place in the same year, 2014, and most residents voted in favour of a union with Russia.

This is why information warfare is so dangerous and why it must be treated with the utmost seriousness. Whether they want to be or not, journalists are also participants in the information war. For this reason, they must, especially in regions experiencing crises, pay close attention to the narratives they allow into public spaces and must understand how to present them responsibly. Journalists must avoid unintentionally supporting those who oppose independent journalism and freedom of speech.

The issue of debates and journalistic ethics become especially sensitive when we speak about the choice that Moldovan citizens face during elections. This choice is between Russia and Europe. In this situation, it is extremely difficult to maintain journalistic ethics, and I will try to explain why.

Under the current Putin regime, journalists are subjected to repression. Some are labelled as foreign agents, and others are put in prison simply for two posts on Facebook. How can a journalist remain equally distant from both sides when the confrontation involves two political systems and one of them, the Putin system, denies your existence as a journalist and recognises no journalism outside propaganda? In such a situation, the victory of that system would mean the end of your profession and the end of your mission as a journalist.

I believe that, in countries like Moldova, where democracy is still developing, journalists are forced to take a position that condemns both the war against Ukraine and the Putin regime. We cannot present in a neutral light a system that aims to destroy our profession.

It is rare, but in our profession there are moments when politicians are genuinely open with us. This usually happens

only when they are certain that no one is recording them. I once witnessed such a moment.

One day a pro-Russian activist who was connected to the circles of the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor told me that Shor had received 250 million euros to launch new media projects. I was very surprised and asked where all these projects were. I wondered how many media platforms, podcasts and new outlets could have been created with that money.

She interrupted me and said, “Do not even think about that. All the money stayed at the top of the party, and a few loyal propagandists were thrown a couple of crumbs.”

This, in my view, is the fundamental weakness of the Russian project in Moldova and the reason it is so unattractive to young people. Shor and other pro-Russian actors in Moldova never intended to invest in youth initiatives or in emerging media projects. They simply pocket the funds that come from the Kremlin.

European projects function in a different way. Small improvements at the local level push overall progress forward. These projects are visible everywhere. Renovated roads, schools, and kindergartens display signs that say “Funded by the European Union”. The same applies to media initiatives. Almost all independent media projects receive support from the European Union.

People in Moldova do not see civic initiatives aimed at positive change that are funded by the Kremlin. On the contrary, the Kremlin’s approach resembles a mayor of a small town who has ruled since Soviet times and who treats the population as a voiceless mass.

This is the difference between a politics of values and a politics of interests. Those who operate within a politics of interests, such as the pro-Russian groups, believe that simply buying votes can change the political choice of Moldovans. Fortunately, this has not happened in the last three elections. This gives me hope that our society is capable of unity and that we can reach a stage at which the influence of Russian state television is a thing of the past.

My goal in journalism is to break the information bubble in which, unfortunately, a significant number of Russian-speaking people remain. This problem persists and the cause is not just Russian state television.

Our society needs to move towards a politics of values. This means placing unity and resilience at the centre of our common goals and choosing development over degradation. It means protecting the rights we have, instead of losing them.

The state will always act with heavy and forceful instruments, but an information war is something delicate. It requires extreme attention. For example, in December 2022, six television channels in Moldova that were linked to the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor were shut down. In my view, this measure will be ineffective as long as there is no alternative television to which viewers can move.

This is why I gladly accepted the offer to work with Polish public television on the project Vot Tak Moldova, which broadcasts in Russian and follows professional journalistic standards. While the state wields an axe, we journalists must act like surgeons and correct situations precisely and carefully.

Online space remains the top priority. In October of this year, my colleagues and I launched the project "ShahDebat." This is a debate show in Russian where two experts discuss the most

important issues of our country. It is my own project, and it brings together everything that motivates me to work in journalism.

If I may share a small joy, our first YouTube episode, a debate titled "Europe or Russia," received nearly two thousand views and one hundred comments. This level of audience engagement shows the potential of the project. Debates can break the bubble despite YouTube algorithms, because the episode will eventually appear in the feed of a pro-Russian viewer. In this format, their point of view is met with the critical judgment of an opponent.

I believe deeply in the power of debates to dismantle information bubbles. I believe that we, journalists, are the ones who can replace a politics of interests with a politics of values. This is my reason for journalism.

Our newsroom kitchen

Getoarbë Mulliqi, Pristina, Kosovo

I grew up in a home in which the kitchen smelled more of newsprint than bread and the clatter of typewriters blended with the sound of coffee boiling on the stove. Our kitchen was not just a place where meals were prepared. It was where truth was printed.

My parents, Shpresë and Haqif Mulliqi, were journalists during the most dangerous time to be one in Kosovo. They were war reporters, documenting events with a courage that even now I struggle to fully comprehend. Together, they produced a magazine called Kombi, a small but powerful publication that tried to keep alive the stories of our people at a time when speaking the truth was deemed subversion.

I was only a child, but I remember vividly how our kitchen would transform into an editorial room. Sheets of paper covered the table. Neighbours and colleagues came in and out, huddling over drafts, whispering urgently as though every word carried the weight of survival. While my parents typed, their backs curved with determination, I played quietly under the table, too young to understand that the pages they produced were acts of resistance.

What I did understand was fear: the hurried looks exchanged when someone knocked on the door too loudly, the nights when

my parents whispered in low voices, the way our home never felt entirely safe.

Aleksandar Vučić, then Minister of Information in Slobodan Milošević's government, targeted Kombi and its editors. He authorised disciplinary measures and filed lawsuits against my father and uncle under Serbia's infamous "public information" law, accusing them of crimes that were nothing more than telling the reality of Kosovo. The consequences were devastating: our shared family apartment was confiscated and arrest warrants were issued. Our home turned into a place of constant fear; yet my parents did not stop. For them, journalism was never just a job; it was a duty, an identity, and survival.

Watching them, I absorbed an unspoken lesson: truth-telling, even when life-threatening, was worth every sacrifice.

One memory stays with me more than most: the interview my mother conducted with a woman who had survived a massacre that, in a single night, took her four children—the oldest 16, the youngest only two—and her husband, among twenty-four members of her family. Only three survived. I watched my mother's fingers tremble as she typed the testimony, tears streaming. I was too young to understand the word genocide but I sensed the gravity in the room. Years later, I learned that this testimony became evidence in international cases against those responsible. At the time, I only knew my mother was carrying unbearable pain onto the page, and that it mattered.

That night, I realised journalism was never only about information. It was about preserving memory, defending dignity, and pursuing justice.

When the war ended, Kosovo was in ruins, but my parents' example was already implanted in me. We rebuilt our lives slowly, piece by piece. I entered my teenage years in a country scarred by trauma but also full of hope. I knew I would follow in their footsteps, though perhaps on a less rocky path.

When I enrolled in the Faculty of Journalism in Prishtina in October 2009, one year after Kosovo declared independence, I felt both the weight of history and the lightness of opportunity. For the first time in generations, being a journalist was not immediately punishable. It was a new Kosovo, with new freedom, and I wanted to use journalism to serve it.

I began my career as a culture journalist. I wrote about theatre, artists, and film festivals. I interviewed actors, writers, and directors who were trying to shape Kosovo's identity in peacetime. At first, it felt worlds away from the kitchen newsroom of my childhood, but it was deeply connected. Telling stories about culture was another way of helping a wounded society heal, another way of preserving identity and voice. Covering a play that dramatised war memories or writing about a young musician breaking into Europe felt like documenting our nation's rebirth. Journalism was my way of holding up a mirror to a society struggling to define itself beyond conflict.

Nonetheless, slowly, my path shifted. Our media environment was becoming fragile. Journalists faced political pressure, threats, and precarious working conditions. Stories were sometimes killed in newsrooms under pressure from powerful interests. I saw colleagues harassed online and women reporters demeaned not for their words but for their gender. The optimism of 2008 was giving way to a harsher reality. I could not stay only a cultural chronicler; I felt compelled to act.

At first, my activism was quiet: supporting colleagues who were targeted, speaking out when journalists were insulted, and joining initiatives to protect freedom of expression. Over time, this work became my central mission. Eventually, I stepped into the role of Executive Director of the Association of Journalists of Kosovo (AJK).

It was both terrifying and natural. Terrifying because I knew the responsibility was heavy. Natural because everything in my life had been leading me there. Leading AJK has never been only about issuing press releases or attending conferences. It means standing up colleagues when they are threatened. It means negotiating with institutions that see journalists as adversaries. It means reminding society that journalism is not the enemy but the essence of democracy.

I remember talking to a young reporter who had been physically attacked after covering a protest. We were both in shock. I told her she was not alone, that the entire community of journalists stood with her. In those moments, I feel the same determination I once saw in my parents' eyes.

The deterioration of media freedom in Kosovo has been painful to witness. Attacks on journalists have become frequent. Online harassment, especially against women, has turned brutal. Politicians sometimes use rhetoric that paints reporters as liars or traitors, fuelling hostility on the ground. Lawsuits designed to silence critical reporting have multiplied. Moreover, the digital sphere has unleashed waves of disinformation that erode trust in credible journalism.

It sometimes feels like fighting an endless battle, a hydra where every lie cut down sprouts three more. Yet I have never doubted the fight is worth it.

What keeps me going are the moments when journalism shows its power. I think of investigations that exposed corruption and forced accountability. I think of cultural reporting that gave young artists recognition and opportunities. I think of the small messages of gratitude from citizens who say, “Thank you for writing about our struggle.” These moments are not always visible, but they are profound. They remind me that, even in a hostile environment, journalism makes a difference.

It also remains deeply personal. My father, who passed away in 2023, left behind not only memories but a legacy woven through journalism and theatre. He was both a journalist and a playwright, a man who believed that words on paper and words on stage could shape how society saw itself. His courage and relentless commitment to truth shaped me more than I can ever express.

At his funeral, colleagues, students, and even strangers shared stories of how his work had touched them, how his reporting during the war gave them strength, how his plays opened their eyes. Each story reminded me that journalism is not measured solely in headlines or statistics, but in the invisible threads it weaves into people’s lives. Standing there in grief, I realised again that continuing his mission was not an option but a responsibility, a torch he placed in my hands, one I must now protect and pass forward.

My mother, too, remains my role model. Unlike my father, whose work often placed him in the spotlight, she embodied a quieter but no less powerful form of bravery. I saw her sit with survivors, write their stories with trembling fingers, and yet never once consider turning away. She taught me that documenting truth was more important than protecting oneself, that sometimes the most selfless act is to bear witness even when it breaks you. From her, I

learned that courage does not always roar; it often whispers, "go on" when everything in you wants to stop.

Everything I do now is infused with their lessons. Their spirit runs through my veins like an unbroken current, shaping my choices, sustaining me in difficult times, reminding me that journalism is more than a profession; it is a way of standing in the world.

This is why I supported the creation of the Network of Women Journalists of Kosovo, the first platform of its kind in our country. I knew that, if we wanted a more equal media landscape, we needed solidarity and empowerment. We needed to support each other in facing harassment, inequality, and intimidation. The network has become a place where women journalists share their struggles, celebrate achievements, and work together for systemic change.

As Executive Director of AJK and as cofounder of the Women Journalists Network, I have seen firsthand how collective strength can turn fear into resilience. When a woman journalist is attacked online, she no longer stands alone. When young reporters seek mentorship, they now find guidance. When we demand safer working conditions, we do it as a community.

So, when I am asked, "Why journalism?" my answer is layered. It is because as a child I saw that words could be more powerful than bullets. It is because I believe stories can heal, inform, and transform societies. It is because even in the hardest moments, when journalists are attacked or vilified, I know the alternative—silence—is far worse.

Yes, the hours are odd, the pay is insufficient, and the pressures are real. Yes, sometimes I wake up at night wondering if I can keep carrying the weight. Then I remember the kitchen newsroom

of my childhood, my parents typing under pressure, risking everything because truth mattered. I remember the survivors whose testimonies were preserved because someone dared to write them down. I remember the young journalists I mentor, their eyes bright with the same fire I once felt. And I know the answer will always be yes.

Journalism is not just my profession; it is my inheritance and my offering. It ties me to my parents, to the small kitchen where I first heard a computer keyboard over the hum of fear, and to the countless stories that might have been lost if not for their courage.

It is the reason my parents risked their lives when silence would have been safer, the reason I chose this path knowing it would never promise wealth or ease, and the reason I keep going when threats feel unbearable.

For me, journalism is the bridge between the past and the future. It carries the memory of those who suffered and resisted, and hands that memory to the generations who must learn from it. It is the light in the darkness, a light that illuminated our home during the war and that I now try to hold steady for others.

It is the rhythm of my childhood, the choice of my youth, and the mission of my adult life. It is not just what I do; it is who I am. As long as I have breath, I will continue to write, to defend, to empower, and to carry forward the torch that was lit in a kitchen newsroom decades ago, when two journalists who happened to be my parents taught me that truth is always worth the risk.

Journalist by chance

Adelin Petrisor, Bucharest, Romania

My name is Adelin Petrisor and I am a journalist. Yes, it sounds like an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, but the comparison is not outlandish, if we consider that both involve addiction. In my case, journalism has been an addiction, if I consider the years spent in the profession. I am 50 years old and I have 30 years' experience in the newsrooms of major Romanian television stations.

I became a journalist by chance. Throughout my adolescence, I dreamed of becoming a prosecutor, solving complicated cases, and catching dangerous criminals. I probably could have done that. At 22, I graduated from law school. However, during high school I caught another bug. I started working for radio, as a DJ, and later I became part of the news team of a new private television station in Romania, which had just emerged from communism. I was lucky. Immediately after the 1989 revolution, newsrooms were looking for young people who wanted to become journalists. I was lucky enough to fill a gap and I learned on the job. Nowadays, it would be much harder to enter the profession without formal training. I was able to learn from experienced colleagues in the newsroom or simply to imitate Western television stations. Later, I had scholarships in Europe and the USA, but the beginning was tough: I learned from others, from Western professional books and I let myself be carried away by the current.

At 21, after only one year or so in the newsroom of a small television station in Bucharest, I found myself, also by chance, in a war zone. I was lucky enough to do reporting in Lebanon. The southern area was controlled by the Israelis, and the situation was tense. While in a war zone, you do not look for the news; rather, the stories find you, and my reports were well-received by the Editor-in-Chief and also by viewers. I enjoyed the tension and adrenaline.

After the collapse of a Ponzi scheme in Albania, in 1997, I went to report from a country in chaos. I did not have much luck. Armed men—almost everyone had weapons; several army depots had been broken into—held the cameraman and me hostage for about 48 hours. Somehow, we managed to notify the Romanian embassy and, later, we were put on the first plane leaving Tirana, without shooting a single frame. Instead, we had both gained experience. In those two days, we had experienced all kinds of emotions. We had eaten little. We had been constantly afraid, felt insecure. We even had to urinate against the wind, because our captors thought it was funny.

Slowly, the years passed and the war zones multiplied. For Public Television, I covered the wars in Algeria, Kosovo, and, in 1999, I was a correspondent in Belgrade during the NATO bombing campaign. I even managed to interview Jeliko Raznatovic, an important commander of the Serbian paramilitary group called Tigers, accused of war crimes, feared by everyone and close to Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic. Public Television sent me as a permanent correspondent to Israel, in 2002, a turbulent and bloody period, during the Second Intifada. I was staying in Jerusalem and there were suicide attacks almost every week.

I managed to interview Yasser Arafat. The Palestinian leader was at his headquarters, Mukata, surrounded by Israeli tanks.

The building had been bombed. The Palestinians had no water, no electricity, and their communications were jammed by the IDF. With difficulty, I managed to sneak into Mukata and did an exclusive interview with Arafat, who was probably in the darkest period of his life.

As my notoriety grew, the offers started pouring in and I joined the news team of one of the most powerful private television stations in Romania, Antena 1. In 2003, I covered the war in Iraq. I was the only Romanian journalist in Saddam Hussein's Baghdad when the Americans began the campaign, in the spring of 2003. I was 27 years old and that war was an important event in my career. Later, I covered Afghanistan, Syria and Iran. I made a documentary about the infamous Guantanamo prison. I saw Afghanistan, both when NATO was there and after the Taliban took control. I was the only Romanian journalist who went into Kabul in 2022, a year after the fundamentalists took control of the country.

I was the first Romanian television journalist who reported from North Korea. In 2012, I made a documentary in Kim Jong-un's country. After the North Korean experience, I wrote a book, "The country with only one fat man", which was a best-seller in Romania. I published an album in Romania with photos from "the most closed country in the world", and later it was published in Seoul, in both Korean and English.

Over the years, I have interviewed political leaders, terrorists, former heads of the CIA or National Security Agency, and NATO military commanders. I stood face to face with Ayatollah Mohammad Fadlallah, the spiritual leader of Hezbollah. I interviewed Israeli prime ministers Benyamin Netanyahu, Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert. I covered Israel's war with Hezbollah, in 2006, and I also I was there immediately after the massacre of

7 October 2023. I had the chance to have in front of my camera generals like Michael Hayden, Ben Hodges and Philip Breedlove.

The pandemic was another intense period for me. I felt like I covered a different kind of war, more complicated and which, unlike the others, was taking place in my home. I filmed in almost all the ICUs of all the important hospitals where doctors were fighting Covid. In the spring of 2020, I was the first Romanian journalist to film in the ICU of a hospital, which was barely coping with the large number of patients. I filmed in the Suceava Hospital, the most stressed. Covid hit hard there, including the doctors and nurses. To get the medical unit back on track, the authorities had appointed a military leadership over the hospital. I did a dramatic report there, which was viewed by a large audience.

In covering the defence sector over decades, I have flown with almost all military aircraft and helicopters, including supersonic ones. I have experienced 9G in the F-16, but I have also flown in the MiG-21, LanceR, Eurofighter Typhoon, and Jas 39 Gripen. I have performed aerial acrobatics with world-famous teams, such as the Baltic Bees.

In 2010, I wrote a book: “My Wars”, with stories from my travels in the hot spots of the world. This year, because I had accumulated more experience, I published the sequel: “Live from the Front Line”. Hopefully, it will be as well-received as the first one.

Journalism is not having the best of times, to put it mildly. Social networks and phones with high-performance cameras led to the widespread belief that anyone can be a journalist. This is false. Despite some slippages in the profession, journalism is clearly necessary for any civilised society because it requires rules and responsibility. Putting a high-performance GoPro on a monkey and letting it loose does not make it a field reporter. I hope that in

time, step by step, the public will understand this and journalists will retain their social utility, even though the truth is often not sexy.

However, due to problems in the profession, due to pressure, over the years, some colleagues chose to change paths: they have entered public relations, become spokespersons for institutions, went to work for the EU, NATO, the UN or powerful NGOs. Many chose much more lucrative jobs, became more powerful, more influential. Some chose politics. Although the situation in the press was never rosy, I was never tempted to change paths. I did not want to go behind a desk, to be, for example, the head of the news. I chose to continue going out into the field. Why? Maybe for the adrenaline, for the tension, for the extraordinary stories or simply because I do not know what else to do.

I became a journalist by accident, but I chose to stay out of passion.

The only thing that makes things real

Ana Brakus, Zagreb, Croatia

I fought really hard with myself not to put the title of this article into ChatGPT as a prompt.

First, so much of daily news journalism, the copying and pasting, the translating with minimal or no localisation, the reporting without context, is now done in exactly that way. Just this week, I saw artificial intelligence (AI) prompts left in articles on Croatian news sites and read about a Pakistani daily newspaper that did the same thing. My brother recently got married. One of his friends decided they could not attend the wedding, so they sent a message explaining why, sadly also leaving the AI prompt in the message. Bummer.

Second, the "why journalism?" question has been living in my head rent-free for years. Maybe AI offers me a new spin, a hidden hope, a utopian vision of the future in which I look forward to getting that spark again, and you, reader, probably know exactly the spark I am referring to. The one that pops up the first time you realise you get to pick up the phone and call anyone you want, anyone in the world, and ask the questions you want answers to. The person on the other side, of course, does not have to answer. They can ignore, evade, or worst of all, give you a non-answer answer.

However, your curiosity is somewhat satisfied. You did something. Somehow, after decades of shaping our unwritten social contract,

you are not considered just some crazy pest. Now, it is your right to call and indeed expected of you, to pursue your curiosity in the public's interest.

I was a young journalist in a cafe in the centre of Zagreb. The year was 2016, and my evening drink with my friends was interrupted when I saw the Minister of Culture arrive at the screening of a revisionist movie promoting the "truth" about a WW2 concentration camp in Croatia. The minister in question, when he took office, did untold damage to the non-profit media ecosystem in the country, and articles linking him to the most shameful period in recent history continued to emerge.

I went up to him, said my name, what I did and said I had questions. He was, I think, surprised and somewhat entertained by my age, gender, and approach. The interview was published and my curiosity satisfied. Everyone I knew wanted to ask that man the same or similar questions. I got to do it.

In Budapest, I met a woman who is now the age I was then. She works as a social media manager, but at the workshop we attended she said she wanted to be a journalist. I waited until the evening and asked her, "So, what made you say that?"

She said that she had so many things to say and to ask, and that she saw spaces that could be filled with new ways of thinking. I was proud. I did not even know her, but it felt like she understood it.

I thought I could change things, have an impact, provide context, create new spaces, track the moving parts that shape our realities. I wanted to question, be sceptical, brave, speak truth to power. I wanted to do something that matters, you know what they say, to help write the first draft of history.

Now, after more than a decade in this work, my expectations are different, more managed. You might even call them more realistic. Now, I just believe things need to be written down. Every so often, something will change. Your investigation might lead to a shift, open a crack, make someone think, maybe even persuade them to behave differently. Yet, that is not the reason, not why journalism matters or why it exists, at least not for me. Things just need to be written down or said aloud.

The answer to why is because, sometimes, it is the only thing that makes things real.

To understand each other's world

David Karaivanov, Sofia, Bulgaria

"When I grow up, I want to be a palaeontologist", my younger self would say to my parents. While other kids played with cars and robots, the animal kingdom was my world. I watched science channels with great interest, imagining that one day I would be a researcher and an adventurer.

"When I finish school, I want to become a historian," said my teenage self. It was in my school years that my passion for this subject began, a discipline that takes you through many eras and enriches your general knowledge. History, combined with literature classes, awakened in me the desire to pass on knowledge. I was preparing to follow that path, with the idea that one day I would be a storyteller.

"I want to help society all my life," I told myself (and I still say it). This desire grew thanks to my mother and my sister, who work in Bulgaria to improve the treatment and care of children with cancer and their families. I knew what I wanted to do, to help.

I fulfilled all these desires in journalism. A year before graduating from high school, I decided I wanted to study this speciality. I wanted a dynamic profession, where no day is like the other. I desired a job that would take me to diverse places and people, a field that writes the history of the present that tomorrow becomes the past, work that can help society.

What drives me in journalism is curiosity. There is no greater pleasure for me than learning something new every day. My mission is to use journalism to spark people's interest in the world around them and prevent them from becoming apathetic. Journalism is both my real and abstract journey, from witnessing real events to experiencing human stories, their inner conflicts and values. The profession allows me to travel across borders and across minds.

In the beginning, I interned and worked as a television field reporter. From my very first report, I realised how rewarding this profession is. Every conversation opens a new world and brings new understanding. The story was about the National Literary Museum, which had created brochures and materials in Braille for visually impaired visitors. Opposite me sat a girl who "saw" the information by touching the symbols with her fingers. The words of her companion stayed with me: "To understand the world of another." That is also part of journalism: exploring viewpoints to be critically retold.

Since then, the profession has introduced me to extraordinary people. What could be better than spending an afternoon with fishermen trout fishing, being a firefighter for a day, or being taught to row by a boy with autism who holds many sports awards?

The luxury of journalism is that it covers every sphere of life, and you can choose the one that interests you most. From the very beginning, I wanted to tell human stories born from major global events. That is why international news is my passion. It reflects larger processes that are constantly evolving and affecting Bulgaria. This is both a challenge and an immense pleasure. I constantly have to build my knowledge using accurate facts and thoughtful analyses, then explain the changing world in accessible language to the Bulgarian public.

My path as an international editor began in the midst of wars, elections, and crises that left a deep mark on the global scene. Now, the biggest battle I fight is with myself, to suppress my emotions and challenge my own perspectives by stepping outside my information bubble. The events that affect human lives also impact psychologically both the audience and the journalist behind the published material.

So far, I have been to one war zone, Israel. As part of a tour organised by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I and other Bulgarian colleagues spent a week in the Holy Land. An exceptional test of my psyche was the day we visited sites of attacks by Hamas. The conversations with ordinary people who survived the 7 October attack by sheer miracle were painful, an event that has changed their lives forever. At the same time, I could see the Gaza Strip in the distance, destroyed buildings and smoke from artillery fire. A place destroyed by the Israeli army, full of human stories we could not reach. These are the moments when a journalist perhaps feels most vulnerable, when witnessing tragedy firsthand. On one hand, the journalist must convey the emotion of the experience to tell the story authentically. On the other hand, if they surrender to their emotions, they become victims of political narratives. There is no room for emotion when those in power are the target and the public interest is the priority.

One of my first realisations about this profession was the impossibility of absolute objectivity, which the guild strives for. Journalists are human. They are shaped by the society they grow up in, with beliefs about life that they do not question. This is where the difficulty arises: to do your job conscientiously, following the facts and not being influenced by opinions. The pursuit of neutrality does not mean indifference, but to be like a sport referee. Your place is in the middle of the field, and all

the fans are booing you. You must make judgements based only on the facts. Absolute objectivity is impossible but you can be honest with your audience. Only then can you work with a clear conscience.

Today, journalism is harder than ever. The flow of information is enormous; the boundary between facts and opinions is blurred and public trust in the media is low. It is also one of the most demanding professions. Once you enter the field, you agree you will often go home long after your workday ends. You must keep up with current events. Sometimes unexpected developments occur, and you must be ready to respond at any moment. You may have to work on weekends and holidays. Even harder is the impact on family and friends, who want to see more of you.

Yet, I chose this path. Because journalism gives me everything I want from life right now. It is a challenging yet enriching field that rewards you with meaning. It broadens my horizon of knowledge, brings me face to face with people and stories, and allows me to be both a witness and a participant in events. I believe that true journalism does more than inform; it awakens, inspires, and can lead to positive change. If just one person has seen the world differently because of my work, it has been worth it.

I would do this anyway

Nataliya Gumenyuk, Kyiv, Ukraine

I have been a journalist for 25 continuous years—without breaks, long vacations, or many days off—since the year I entered journalism school. A workaholic, I have worked with most Ukrainian television channels, contributed to major global publications, run several newsrooms, founded two media organisations (including the one I lead today), covered dozens of foreign conflicts, uprisings, and revolutions, and spent the past 12 years reporting on Russia's war against my country, including travelling to occupied areas. I have written books and produced several dozen documentaries focused on human rights.

Yet, throughout my career and my entire life, I have felt that I have "worked" no more than five to seven hours in the strict sense of the word, and I did not enjoy even that part. By "work" I mean labour done for one basic purpose: being paid, something you will not do without financial compensation.

The answer to "Why journalism?" is simple. Whether I won the lottery or barely survived on a minimal income, I would still do the same today. For me, journalism is neither a job nor a vocation. It is a privilege: the opportunity to learn, to understand the world better, to follow my curiosity, and to turn it into a public good by telling stories that, I hope, serve people.

Since I was young, I have been drawn to humanitarian work. For a country on the periphery, as Ukraine was then, the only relevant field seemed to be diplomacy. However, in the profoundly corrupt university system of the early 2000s, it was impossible to study something as prestigious as international relations without a substantial bribe (or without being a linguistic prodigy, which I was not). I failed. The leading state university offered an alternative: a year of preparatory courses, with the final exams serving as entrance exams for the journalism faculty. The chances of getting in were much higher and the possibility of becoming a foreign correspondent still existed. Eventually, I did.

I entered university the same year Ukraine lost one of its most important political journalists. Georgiy Gongadze, founder of one of the first independent online outlets, Ukrainska Pravda, had been missing for a year after being kidnapped. Only later did we learn that Ukraine's president, Leonid Kuchma, was allegedly implicated, and that Gongadze had been decapitated on the orders of the Interior Minister. In our first month as students, we went to the Maidan to demand justice for Gongadze, although we did not even have computers or internet access to read what he had written.

The Ukrainian media landscape was tightly controlled, not a full dictatorship, but one dominated by oligarchs. A handful of powerful businessmen commanded political parties, business, and the media. Television channels served as tools of their political influence, competing with one another, yet always loyal to power. With so few channels, there was almost no real choice about where to work.

The international news desk was the one place where you could work freely. Thus, I quickly became an unpaid intern monitoring global news at one of the few television stations, tracking

everything from casualties from typhoons in the Philippines to the start of the Iraq War. I woke at 4:15 am, caught the first trolley bus, then climbed a long hill to a remote station. At the next channel, the dormitory doors were closed until 6 am, but the company car arrived at 5:30 am; every time I woke the guard to let me out, he bullied me so harshly that I feel sorry for myself to this day.

There was nothing glamorous about being a foreign news reporter at the Ukrainian TV in the early 2000s, but it was an experience. I could at least keep learning, writing about prisoner exchanges in the Middle East, rocket launches in North Korea, or the Cannes Film Festival. In addition, I could still report real stories for the student paper, an opposition channel, or a small production studio—invaluable experience, though barely paid.

Looking back, I know that at that time any journalist working inside mainstream legacy media in Ukraine was pushed daily into something shameful or forced to manoeuvre to avoid it. In 2004, as Ukraine approached a pivotal presidential election whereby the democratic opposition challenged a corrupt regime, the entire state propaganda machine was mobilised to ensure victory for the Russian-backed candidate. Oligarch money bought some of the country's top journalists, and the security service intimidated others. Space for honest work was shrinking. Your job, your integrity, even your right to the profession were at risk. Still, leaving a major television channel with a broad audience felt like surrender.

Then came the Orange Revolution. Democracy won. People in the street defended their choice, and the Kremlin's preferred candidate, Viktor Yanukovych, lost. The media landscape changed overnight. The oligarchs still wanted to play politics, but their monopoly on political influence had been broken.

This moment was decisive: my first paid jobs were in an environment without explicit political censorship. The owners still had their preferences, but the real problem was corruption: paid political inserts, business-sponsored stories, and editors taking cash under the table. But the international news was not corrupt, as it brought neither money nor fame; almost nobody cared about foreign reporting.

Working endless nights, I persuaded my editors of why I needed to cover elections in the US and Iran and report complex international stories for the country's largest television channel. At 24, I became the head of the foreign news desk. Foreign news reporting interested me not only because I cared about humanitarian crises, but because I saw the profound injustice in how the world treats what is "foreign", especially in a country like ours. We demand that others judge Ukraine fairly, yet we are often dismissive of other nations.

For a century, international reporting relied either on war correspondents or on adventure-style travel pieces that highlighted exotic extremes. This created the impression that the world was strange, dangerous, and defined by anomalies, because global news covered little else. We were outraged to see Ukraine treated the same way: portrayed only through its exceptions. I believed it was my mission to counter this.

Most of us are normal and the world, mostly, is normal too. By understanding the world, you understand yourself better. A leading Ukrainian intellectual, a priest, told me that a person feels weak when they feel isolated, atomised, but, if they feel part of a broader fabric, a network, they become much harder to break. That is where I saw my personal "superpower": seeing myself not only as part of a community, a city, or a country, but as part of the world. When you see yourself that way, you become unshakeable.

That is why I still work in global journalism, even if it seems to be valued by very few.

The Arab Spring began, and I was devastated that I could not report on it. I belong to the generation that lived through Ukraine's Orange Revolution in the early 2000s, only to watch our democracy collapse again six years later. So, when protests erupted across the Arab world, I was genuinely excited. Even Russians were taking to the streets. Ukrainians were silent, and I watched with admiration. I wanted to understand what happens to people during a revolution and whether it is possible to avoid repeating our own scenario.

With almost no money and a two-day seminar invitation as my only formal pretext, I took the risk of flying to Jordan as a freelancer from a country in which people barely cared about what was going on in the region. That freelance experience clarified what the job really was. Classical television journalism—no matter how hard I tried to make it good—was built around visualising a pre-written script and inserting a few standard comments to fit a preconceived narrative. Staying with activists and journalist colleagues, I had the most precious advantage: time on the ground and no editor pressuring me, because no one was paying. I began to understand what real journalism is: arriving somewhere and first working out what the story actually is, rather than imposing one.

For two and a half years, I earned enough to cover the cost of my plane tickets and went to Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, Palestine, and the Syrian border. I wrote a book about that experience, which allowed me to understand my own society better than anything else. Those years indeed grounded me. You do not draw strength from watching people whose lives run smoothly, but from societies where life is far harder than yours, where people facing

immense challenges still manage to create, improvise, and keep going. That is what inspires you, and that "foreign experience" continues to sustain me, especially now living in a country that has been invaded.

Though friends praised what I was doing, and I somehow became an "Arab expert", mainly because there were so few of us in Ukraine. Still, by Ukrainian standards, my work looked wildly exotic and felt marginal, more like a private hobby. Had the fee for my writing mainly been symbolic, the editors probably would not have published it at all. Few people needed those dispatches. It was the only moment in my life when I began to doubt whether what I did made any sense. I was moving to Beirut to study Arabic and was considering taking up a visual art.

When the Revolution of Dignity began, I returned from Beirut and started live-streaming at the protests. Hromadske TV, which the entire country watched during the protests, played a crucial role. Our live-streams from the streets acted as a safeguard: when the police knew they were being observed, they were less likely to attack people.

I was one of the few independent Ukrainian journalists who had covered foreign conflicts and wars. I was oddly experienced compared to the investigative reporters who were brave but mainly dealt with threats from the security service, not the riot police.

After the first blood was shed on the Maidan, some of my more experienced colleagues broke down. They were convinced that a single shot meant the beginning of a civil war, although it was, in reality, an ordinary protest. For me, it was strangely easy. I understood conflicts. I understood wars. I knew we were in a far better position than the one we feared, and that we would eventually emerge from it.

When Russia launched its war in Crimea, we understood immediately that visibility, the physical presence of journalists, could slow down events or even prevent violence, as later transpired in Donbas. Thus, we continued. The war entered our lives, and I spent years doing frontline reporting but also trying to navigate the world of negotiations and international security. It took a foreign invasion for the Ukrainian public to understand why the international news matters. We were forced to understand how the world of geopolitics works. I was fit for the job, which all of a sudden became more and more important.

I took seriously the responsibility of working for Hromadske. For a time, I even served as acting head of the channel, simply to maintain public trust.

Our journalism was impeccable. We won all the awards, and often we were the only ones to tell a sensitive story. Still, we constantly had to justify why journalism mattered at all, especially to foreign donors who funded us yet insisted our primary task was to "become financially sustainable". We knew perfectly well how to produce news for primary television channels. We had left those wealthy commercial networks precisely to do something meaningful for the public. Yet, we were repeatedly trained in marketing. At one point, journalists from The Washington Post—already owned by one of the wealthiest men in the world, Jeff Bezos—arrived to teach us "how to earn money", even though their own newsroom had been sustained by an extraordinary capital injection.

My closest like-minded colleague and I founded the Public Interest Journalism Lab (PIJL). Its mission is to articulate the argument for "why journalism" and to use nothing but journalistic tools to serve society: reducing polarisation, strengthening democratic discourse, popularising human rights reporting, and documenting

life under occupation. We produced films, articles, and media research. We were no longer celebrities from mainstream television or popular online outlets (which, in Ukraine, while valuable in exposing corruption, helped undermine trust in institutions by reinforcing their own agendas).

PIJL's work was often seen as intellectual, high-brow, or marginal. Yet every project we produced—whether research on how to build trust in vaccine reporting, how to reach people in occupied territories, or documentaries about recent traumatic history—reinforced a single principle. Journalism should not compete with entertainment or sport, nor try to make itself sexier, funnier, or more clickable. Turning political talk shows into sporting contests in which teams fight only deepens polarisation. Journalism should be useful.

In March 2022, during the first days of the full-scale invasion, PIJL co-founded The Reckoning Project, an international initiative of journalists and lawyers documenting war crimes. Our journalistic work is used not only for advocacy or raising awareness, but for litigation, supporting survivors, and preserving memories that might otherwise be erased. By speaking with survivors, we try to help them turn clouds of pain into coherent stories. We do not know when, or even whether, trials will take place. The survivors we spoke to, instead of being defined as victims of the Russian military, became storytellers who could reduce the Russian soldiers to villain characters in narratives preserved by Ukrainians.

We also support visits by senior editors from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, regions where Russia's war against Ukraine is often seen as a distant proxy conflict. We are not advocating anything. We are making a point: that genuine reporting, physically stepping onto Ukrainian soil, helps their audiences understand that

Ukraine is real. In doing so, we show that fact-based journalism still makes sense. Perhaps it is the only thing people continue to trust.

Today, the world is consumed by debates about artificial intelligence, technology giants, and the future of information. Media is discussed at global forums more intensely than at any time in decades. Yet, funding for journalism remains disproportionately small, even though journalists are the ones trained to verify facts, check information, mediate between polarised groups, and make sense of complexity. People talk endlessly about "threats" but journalism is the profession designed precisely to address them.

The full-scale invasion made it clear to me: journalism is, above all, a public service. Like doctors, rescue workers, or utility engineers, we perform a function. Our only privilege is the chance to speak with interesting people and to ask them questions.

This profession satisfies your curiosity and intellectual hunger. However, it also carries an obligation to the people who trusted us with their stories. Nothing you learn as a journalist is yours to keep. When people speak to you, your failing to write their story is a form of corruption. They do not talk to you as private individuals; they talk to you as a journalist who will use their words for the public benefit, not personal gain.

To cry or not to cry

Mladen Cadikovski, Skopje, North Macedonia

The day is sunny, but I feel cold. I wake up with a bad premonition that this April morning will bring nothing good. Don't let emotions into your work, I tell myself, that way it's easier. More than a month has passed since the beginning of NATO's bombing of targets in Serbia. People are dying in Serbia and in Kosovo. Tens of thousands of people are fleeing. Families with small children. Mostly women, children and the elderly. In trains, cars, tractors, and horse-drawn carts. They stream into Macedonia.

Staring blankly, exhausted from the journey, with dirty clothes that smell of smoke and fear. Mothers clutch their small children tightly by the hand. Children cry from the horror they are living through, some of them so small they can barely walk and already with trauma in their eyes.

One mother, I remember, held a baby wrapped in a blanket, whispering something in Albanian to it, while tears ran down her face, mixing with the dust from the road. We are welcoming them in one of the refugee camps. Hundreds of white tents, no infrastructure. Water is distributed in bottles. Food is scarce, but it is something.

It had rained in the previous days. Mud everywhere. Dirty. Chaos is everywhere: the sounds of children screaming, women arguing over the order in front of the improvised toilets, only a few chemical

cabins for thousands of people, with a suffocating smell of filth. People push in the crowd, looking for a piece of dry ground to sit on. An old man, leaning on a stick, stands alone and looks into the distance, as if waiting for someone who will never come.

The UNHCR people are running up and down, handing out packages, small but significant: soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes. Each item matters, yet against the scale of need, the help feels like a drop in the ocean. The tents sway in the wind and, inside, families press close to each other on thin mattresses, sharing stories about the bombs, about lost homes, about the fathers who stayed to fight. At least they have somewhere to spend the night. But will there be comfort for these people? With their thoughts, they are back in their homeland, with the fathers, the husbands. It is sad. But don't let emotions in, I tell myself again. This is journalism and journalism sometimes can hurt you. It will pass, I tell myself.

"I couldn't find my husband and children. They forced me to leave alone, and now I don't know where they are and whether they are alive. In this camp, I feel like a ghost without roots, without a future. Everything that was dear to me is destroyed and far away," says Lindita, a woman from a small village in Kosovo, and again I tell myself, don't let emotions in. But "without roots, without a future" echoes in my head. Still, I choose not to cry.

I look up. A familiar face. Who was this man? What on earth is Richard Gere doing here? I think it was 29 April. He is with a team from the International Rescue Committee. He is dressed in a simple jacket, with no trace of Hollywood glamour. He was moving among the tents, talking to mothers, holding children in his arms, some smiled at him, some did not know who he was. As a journalist, I did not miss the opportunity. I approached him with the microphone, asking him about his impressions. "These people

are not asking for anything more than what every human being deserves, dignity and safety," he told me, and added, "We cannot sit with folded arms; each of us must help, at least with our voice, so that these people can get a chance for a new beginning."

As a journalist with over 30 years of experience in the Macedonian media, in reporting or editorial positions, it is all the same: I am a witness to the power of journalism to change lives. In those moments, I did not know whether I had helped Lindita's voice to reach those who could make a change, but a few months later I understood; journalism makes a difference. The conditions in the camps were improving every day, until the security preconditions were fulfilled, and Lindita and tens of thousands of people began returning home. Into a new uncertainty, but home is home.

In the 1990s, as a young reporter I had the feeling that every word, every text, every video story, every interview had an extremely strong effect on viewers. We easily overcame attempts at silencing, censorship, probably because, we felt that we were changing things. We lived through the transition of Macedonian society mostly on the streets, at protests of workers from the many Macedonian factories that were shutting down under the onslaught of the new times, the move from socialism to democracy, from a button-controlled economy to capitalism. That was painful for many. Those were not just numbers of people who were left without work; those were human destinies. We had to fight battles with the communist directors who were trying to grab the factories, with the bankruptcy trustees who were ransacking the companies. It was a complete dismantling of the foundations of the state; corruption was being installed as a system of rule.

It was 1997 in Bitola when the savings house TAT collapsed. What presented itself as a lucrative investment opportunity was, in truth,

a classic pyramid scheme that deceived more than 13 000 people, ordinary citizens lured by promises of impossibly high interest rates. The scandal saw the theft of 60 million German marks.

Backed by close ties to influential political figures, the key architects of TAT convinced Bitola's residents to entrust them with their life savings. When the scheme fell apart, it left behind shattered lives and broken families. Overnight, people lost everything. The city was gripped by despair. Reports of deep depression were followed by cases of suicide. The aftermath was devastating.

As journalists, we faced pressures that came close to censorship. We were forced to question whether, and how boldly, we should publish the names of business and political power-holders implicated in the scheme. Our reporting eventually created significant public pressure. Although the legal process never brought to book the main political actors, none of them ever returned to public life. Society had been profoundly shaken and the demand for change became impossible to ignore.

There was a change of government, the "soft" communists left; the "hard" nationalists came. The game continued similarly. The actors changed and the plunder continued. I tried, as a journalist, to maintain the rhythm and strengthen the pulse of change. The state's assets continued to be looted, as if the state were being sold off in pieces. Public procurement had zero transparency: politicians awarded tenders to their own firms, without public calls, without competition, with prices inflated threefold, fivefold, tenfold. In the midst of the conflict in Macedonia in 2001, when the people were fighting for survival and we did not know whether the state would exist or not, the authorities manipulated the budget. Millions of denars disappeared into "special funds" for security, but in fact went into the pockets of politicians and businessmen.

One scandal after another: suspicious procurement of weapons, uniforms, vehicles, parts for tanks, everything without invoices, without control. We, the journalists, uncovered them, but we were often alone in that battle. Corruption was not a mistake; it was a system. Directors were changing, but all played by the same rule: take as much as you can while you are in power. Maximum corruption, minimum responsibility.

As for me? I wrote; we filmed; we published and watched as the scandals lined up, while the culprits remained free. The state turned into a private company, and journalists were the only control.

The year is 2006. Journalism was alive. A1 Television dictated the changes on the social scene. It was an extremely powerful medium. Every word was worth something. Every shot brought change. The importance of A1 was visible in its resistance to power. We exposed corruption, abuses in the highest circles of power, from directors and judges to prosecutors, ministers and prime ministers. The evening news on A1 was awaited at home with popcorn. A1 was the citizens' television. It did not belong to the politicians.

That bothered those in power. I was a young but experienced news editor. I began to face subtle pressures. They started in the form of requests, daily phone calls. It was my personal mission to oppose that attempt at censorship wrapped in the cellophane of false friendly persuasion: to keep quiet about something, for some news to go out in another form, if possible to slip in some statement that was important to them. When that failed in dulling the sharpness of our reporting, the friendly persuasions became open arguments, then text messages asking: "Is this how we are going to build the state?"

The pressures continued with ever stronger pressure on the owner of the television station, everyday inspections and constant threats. Then, in December 2010, the government shut down A1. Numerous police officers entered the station offices, under the pretence that they were looking for documents about crime, and in fact they were looking for a way to silence the station.

My editors taught me that journalists change governments, not that governments change journalists. The authorities blocked the accounts of the station. Work was practically impossible. By a politically engineered process, the owners and directors were held in detention. As an editor at A1, I gave everything I had to protect my colleagues and the station in a mesh of journalistic and civic resistance to the murder of A1. To protest, we came out in front of the government building, together with numerous citizens, from where the news was broadcast for four months during 2011, as a symbol of our conviction that the journalists are right, that the truth is our only driving force.

"Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter," wrote Thomas Jefferson, before becoming American president (1801–1809). After he became president, he was often criticised in the newspapers, as a godless man, a coward and a traitor. However, he stuck to his principle, which he completed as president: "Freedom of the press cannot be limited without being lost."

Today's politicians have short memories. They are one thing while being the opposition; another thing when in power. Thus, sadly, the era of A1 ended. On 31 July 2011, the station was shut down. After that, the state sank into information darkness, yet further proof that journalism can hurt. I chose not to cry.

The critical voices never fell silent. The more you choke freedom, the more it will try to find its place. That which was confined to darkness was seeking the light.

Social networks came, online platforms, as an introduction to the new digital era. Macedonia was still an authoritarian society. Political opponents were being destroyed. The voice of the public was minimised. Students who raised their voices were beaten. The baton hurts less than injustice. Journalists and "journalists" were divided into camps. One camp for the truth, the other against, as in every society in which an authoritarian government has its own "journalists", "analysts" and "supporters", mostly regime-dependent or blackmailed people; they are all the same.

The rumours about mass wiretapping of citizens were getting more persistent. The number of dissatisfied people was rising. The students began to protest. Ethnically colourful Macedonia began to unite against the regime that wanted to establish total control, against corruption, against the lack of freedom. In 2015, I received a folder with my own tapped conversations. Suddenly, the rumours were true. Not only me, the authorities had wiretapped over a hundred journalists and public figures, mostly opponents of the policies of division, hatred and corruption.

The year is 2016 and spring brought the Colourful Revolution. The people came out on the street with paint and balloons in their hands, and not with stones. As an editor of Fokus, I watched how thousands of citizens, led by young people of all ethnicities, coloured the buildings of power in symbols of resistance. We wrote and filmed every thrown balloon, every call for justice. In those moments, journalism was not just reporting; it was a weapon of truth. The nation woke up. Then, after 20 years in this profession, I understood, journalism does not exist only to register history, but to help write it.

Governments were changing and journalism was changing. Who would have believed that from stone tablets to printing presses, to big television screens, today everyone can be a "journalist". On social networks, there is a flood of journalism. We are all experts and journalists, but we have to fight that as well. We must gather the scattered feathers from the pillows of propaganda.

A typical example was the pandemic. Fake news about vaccines, conspiracy theories, propaganda wars on social networks spread faster than the virus. Open Twitter and hope was killed. Open Facebook to discover extended death. A verified piece of news, on the other hand, can still save a life. The algorithm of social networks has become the editor of the new age and confronting it has been a defining experience.

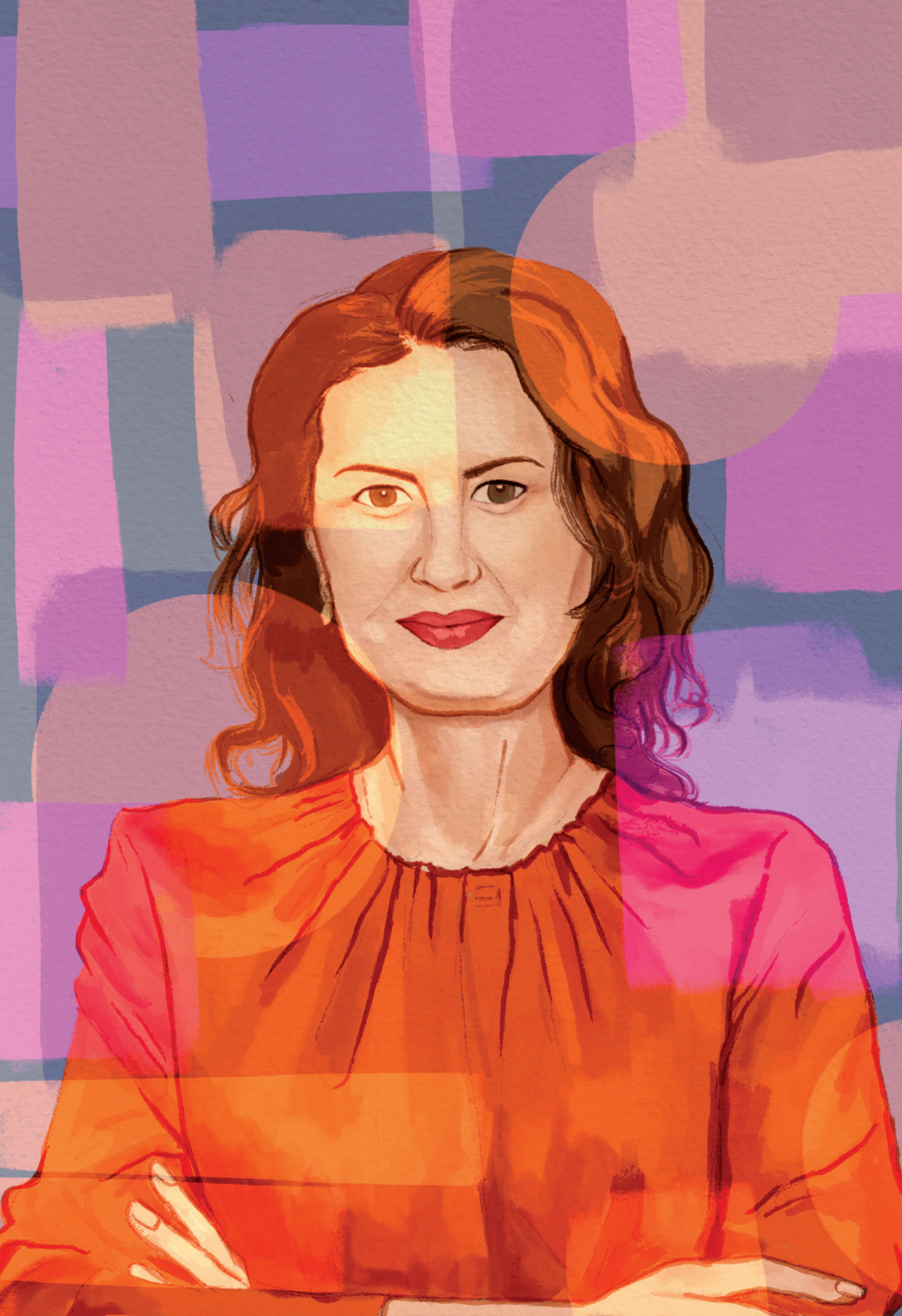
It has never been easy to be a journalist. Now perhaps the hardest time for journalism is coming. We are not only fighting with politicians and business power-brokers, but also with anonymous profiles, with click bait, with likes that suffocate reality.

Sometimes we also fight with ourselves. How to remain professional and attractive at the same time? How to be substantial and provide information and to have a good headline? Disinformation is the new censorship. For many, it is invisible but very dangerous. It touches the emotions of every person. We will not surrender.

On that April morning in 1999, in the mud of the refugee camp, with Lindita in front of me and Richard Gere in the background, with the microphone in my hand, "Don't let emotions in", I was telling myself. Still, emotions are part of us. They shape the story. Journalism is not "business as usual". It can hit, with pressures, with shut-downs, with wiretapping. It can hurt even more when you watch the shocking events around you. Wars, death, fires,

injustice. That is why, after three decades in journalism, I choose to cry. Because human destinies stand behind every letter written in this text, thousands of people who have faced injustice, fear for the future, pain, loss, and uncertainty in the refugee crisis, in the conflict in Macedonia, in the looting of state capital, in the loss of jobs, in the shutting down of A1, in every judicial injustice, in the Colourful Revolution, in the Covid pandemic.

They say journalism is the best profession in the world, if you leave it on time. I choose to remain here and, even if I cry, that too is manly!



The stories that made me the journalist I am now

Kristina Baxanova, Sofia, Bulgaria

"I'm going to be a journalist!"

My primary school teacher was surprised by my answer. She had just praised my essay, telling me that I was surely meant to be a writer. I was nine years old, and I already knew I wanted to be a journalist.

My uncle was a journalist, and at home we always waited impatiently for his stories. They were different, exciting, and all of them real. I did not understand every detail, but when he spoke everyone listened, completely absorbed. Some of his stories made us laugh until we cried; others filled the room with silence.

I wanted to explore the world, too. To me, journalism was an adventure, one I could not wait to begin. History seemed to unfold around me, drawing me ever closer to journalism. During my study at university, I realised that journalism was not just the kind of adventure I had imagined as a child, but a huge responsibility.

I witnessed historic events that changed my country, Bulgaria, Europe and the world: political transformation, migration flows to Europe, terrorist attacks, the Covid pandemic, and wars, but also achievements, discoveries, and personal stories that inspire the world.

There are many stories that remind me why I chose journalism, like that of Toshko. As a young reporter, I met him at the school for blind children in Sofia while he was learning to write in Braille. Toshko lost his sight a few weeks after birth due to a failure of outdated equipment in the maternity ward. When I asked him what his favourite game was, he answered: "blind man's bluff!"

Telling Toshko's story drew public attention to children with retinopathy, a condition that occurs when newborns in incubators receive incorrect levels of oxygen and led to the replacement of old incubators in many maternity hospitals. When we, as journalists, tell stories that bring public awareness, lead to solutions, and help correct injustices, we fulfil one of journalism's vital roles in society.

Journalism took me to Berlin in September 2004. I spent a year with colleagues from other European countries as a fellow at the International Centre of Journalism at the Free University. Until then, I had only a memory from my childhood of a family trip to the GDR in the mid-1980s. Berlin was divided by a wall. We were on the east side of the city and looked at the Brandenburg Gate from a distance. The barriers and the soldiers made it unreachable. I asked my father, with a child's curiosity, "What's on the other side of the street?" He looked to the western and whispered to me, "One day you'll find out."

The start of my one-year journalistic adventure in Berlin took me other side. My apartment was on Bernauer Straße, a main street in Berlin that had been divided by the Wall for more than 28 years. Many escape attempts from East to the West, a street where history was written through many human lives.

In 2006, I returned to Berlin to film my first 30-minute television documentary: The stories of Bernauer Straße. There I met Hans-Joachim Helwing-Wilson, a photographer, who had captured the

story of the street. He was arrested and sentenced to 15 years in prison, guilty only of showing the truth, which conflicted with the position of the GDR communist party. I also spoke to Hartmut Richter, who managed to escape from East to West Berlin and later helped 33 other East Germans, but was caught while trying to save his sister and imprisoned.

Gerta Neumann was one of the oldest residents born on Bernauer Straße, just opposite the church. During the years she kept in her memories all different pictures of the street. She spoke in front of the camera how the wall was build, how the church remained behind it and how its bell tower turned into a military watchtower on the so-called Death Strip. Years later, when the church was blown up, Greta Neumann lost her hope she would ever see the other side of the sidewalk again. The evening of 9 November 1989 brought her hope back. The Wall finally fell and Greta said: "To me, now it feels completely normal. It's as it should be, to cross the street freely, from one side to the other."

Today, Bernauer Straße still preserves a section of the Wall and the Death Strip, as a reminder of a divided city and a divided Europe during the Cold War, but also to honour the courage of those who wanted freedom and risked their lives to gain it.

Several years later, my journalistic path led me to Christian Führer, Pastor at St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig, one of the key figures of the peaceful civic protests in the GDR. The quiet courage of those protests inspired and helped spread the democratic spirit across Eastern Europe.

I will never forget the day I met Christian Führer in Leipzig, in front of St. Nicholas church. He told me about November 1981, the day he held the first prayer for peace in front of a group of young people, some of whom had been labelled by the state as

"undesirable elements". At one point, the youths began expressing their anger about what was happening to them at school, about the strict party instructions on how they should behave, think, and speak. "Suddenly, silence fell," Pastor Führer recalled. "They realised that the church was a small island of freedom, a place where they could finally speak openly."

This marked the beginning of the weekly peace prayers at St. Nicholas church, a space where a critical community began to form, where people debated freely, questioned the system, and found moral courage. The discussions that began inside the church soon moved out into the streets, becoming peaceful demonstrations. In the spring of 1989, the church was surrounded by police, but people continued to gather, and for the first time the shout rang out: "We are the people!"

I like telling stories about the essence of freedom and examples of personal courage. Freedom is essential for every democratic society, particularly today, when new efforts are being made to bend democratic values, rewrite history, and to undermine democracy itself. This places a tremendous responsibility on journalists to defend the truth.

As a journalist covering international issues, conflicts and wars, many times I heard the question: "On which side are you?" This question brings me back to the city of Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was April 2018 when I met Zoran Laketa. Zoran became our guide through the history of Mostar and the war in the 1990s. He led us along a street that had been a front line. "I stood on this side and fired across the street, where in fact … my own brother was." Zoran's words still echo years after our interview.

During the war, Zoran fought on the side of the Croats, his brother on the side of the Bosnian Muslims, while their father was part of

the Serbian army. In the war, he lost his brother. Years later, looking back with the distance that time provides, Zoran still could not understand why people in Mostar—who knew each other and had once lived together like a family—began to fight among themselves and asked himself why that war was necessary. He challenged me: "And you, on which side are you?" I looked at the bridge over the river and answered, "We, the journalists, must look at both sides of the river and tell the story from every perspective. This is my job!"

Until 24 February 2022, I had never imagined that Europe would face another war. A breaking news message woke me up early in the morning: Russian troops entered Ukraine; missiles struck Kyiv. A 24-hour live news marathon began. It was one of the most difficult moments in my career as a journalist and head of the international news desk. Information was scarce, verified footage was missing, and viewers expected clarity. Meanwhile, social media turned into a battlefield of unconfirmed claims and fake videos.

In such a complex international environment, it is crucial for journalists to remain precise and cautious with information coming from unclear or unverifiable sources. Sensationalism is unacceptable, and being first means nothing if the information cannot be confirmed by at least two reliable sources.

In the first hours, my task was to collect as much information as possible and verify every detail. Our reporters in Kyiv were broadcasting live, until they called to say the city was going into lockdown. It was a critical moment that required clear thinking to make the right decisions. It was a moment when you are responsible not only for the news feed, but also for the safety of your team.

The first days of the war reminded me once again that journalists are among the first witnesses to events that later become history.

The fact that, on that dark day for Europe, many people turned to established media for reliable information showed one thing clearly: trust must be earned and defended every day.

After more than 25 years of working as a journalist, if I am asked "why journalism?", my answer is because it is a meaningful life adventure devoted to serving society and protecting the truth.

Life, obituary, Wikipedia and travel

Ivan Sveatcenco, Chisinau, Moldova

"Why Journalism" is asked in this book of stories and it is a strange question. Before you start reading, I warn you: it takes about seven minutes to read this text and you may be no wiser by the end of it.

My name is Ivan. I am a political journalist, and I have been in the media for over 30 years. I am a philologist and linguist by education, and I live and work in the Republic of Moldova. To prove my professional competence, I will share just one fact. In November 1999, I said, "Putin is sh*t." After that, I found myself alone. No one understood me, not my colleagues, not my friends, not my relatives. My girlfriend at the time hung a portrait of Putin in the bedroom, and my wonderful friend hung his photo in the hallway. The latter did it to troll me, but it was my father who gave me a T-shirt, and who was depicted on the front? Putin riding a bear.

I would like to believe that 24 February 2022 put a definitive end to disputes about politics and journalism.

I dare say that journalism is the best profession in the world. With each year, I become more and more convinced of this. For decades, at international seminars, conferences, and other events, people have been discussing "the crisis in the profession": low salaries, round-the-clock work, propaganda attacks, and

lately the use of artificial intelligence (AI). I find these drawn-out discussions ridiculous. The so-called crisis has been going on around the world for thousands of years. Moreover, I am not convinced propaganda is effective. It mostly affects people who are narrow-minded and naïve or deceitful and hypocritical.

Journalism can provide a comfortable average income. As for AI, which will supposedly replace journalists — after all, why do we need people when AI can search by all topics and compile information itself — it is journalists who will have to publish their texts online, which AI will then rework. That is why journalism has a long future ahead of it.

However, professional success requires several components. As Alice in Wonderland said, you have to run very fast just to stay in one place. In other words, you need to develop your skills and range of professional abilities. However, this is not a duty; it is an investment in yourself and your interesting life. Write your own obituary; make it touching and interesting. Otherwise, if you want your own Wikipedia page, fill it with unusual and useful material.

My profession is my hobby. Do you watch YouTube? For me, it is my job to watch political interviews and publish my own. There is nothing more interesting than having a highly rated interview and meeting an interesting, famous person. Right now, I can call the Pope. That is in theory, of course, but I am only 11 digits away from Pope Leo. The world has become interconnected. Nevertheless, despite the ubiquity of smartphones, only a journalist (an interviewer with experience, a representative of a media outlet in demand by the audience, among other qualifications) can ask the Pope for an interview and talk to him alone and on camera.

I have interviewed five presidents, but what I remember most is 1995 and my first job at a newspaper, when I was 16. I interviewed a homeless man, a person who had lost everything and was left on the street. I was hoping to help him. His feet were rotting; he was eating from the trash and could barely walk. He smelled like he had not washed in months and smelled of the end of life, the smell of destruction and tears. Somehow, my publication helped him. I want to believe that.

I will always remember this case. Journalism gives you an incredible range of knowledge, acquaintances, and communication, with a wide variety of representatives of society. Yesterday an interview with a homeless person, tomorrow with the president, and probably only the noble profession of emergency medicine can compare in terms of the breadth of social strata it covers.

On the other hand, look at how important honest military journalism is. Ideally, it should save lives just as medicine does, because it reveals the horror and senselessness of war. One has been waged in Europe for almost four years. I am not capable of military journalism; this is my honest view of myself. Nevertheless, I can remind the audience of the fragility and necessity for peace, as well as the fact that the Russian Federation seems to have gone mad.

I would like to be a surgeon or a world-famous writer, but today I am a journalist. I had already worked as a "doctor". For several years, I wrote for the column Journalist Changes Profession, which is a unique opportunity to live other lives. I was a medical student in an ambulance, and in one day I saw dozens of cases of trauma. I read tarot cards, made fake vodka, bought drugs, ran an Airbnb-style business a quarter of a century before the service existed, and sold chickens and second-hand goods at a market. I tried on

dozens of other people's lives. Then another quality appeared in me, a romantic cynicism and prudence.

Yes, I understand that it is possible to work in an office from 9 to 5. It offers stability, a predictable career path, personal victories, a sense of significance, and, perhaps, financial bonuses and a holiday once a year. However, consider another angle.

Few things inspire me more than Japan and I do not understand how you can sign a lifetime employment contract with a Japanese company and have a single line in your CV. People are different. Cultures are different too. Journalism does not teach; it shows the immensity of the world, the breadth of perception, instils tolerance, and broadens horizons.

However, if you are reading this book, it is unlikely that you dream of lifelong employment. Replacing travel through the universe with a daily commute to an assembly line or office? Then you have achieved enlightenment or our world is unfair, or journalism is the best profession in the world.

Consider journalism as a journey. Want to know one of the main secrets of a successful media career? It is travelling alone. You need to saturate your brain with new things and build new neural connections, which will be useful for work and, as a bonus, prolong your life. Plus, it is exciting. Even just going to a museum will help (the word even is ironic here). Travelling alone requires discipline and courage. It also requires planning and money. You are responsible for your own actions and behaviour, and if an emergency or force majeure occurs, you are far from home. You are not late for anything; you move at your own pace. You follow Russian fiction writer Victor Pelevin's commandment: do not swim against the wave, do not swim with the wave, but through the wave. Moreover, solo travel is a shortcut to life.

In January 2014, I embarked on an incredible journey: first to Rome for a week, then to Amsterdam for two weeks, with a long layover in Barcelona. I flew to Rome on the eve of Orthodox Christmas. Ten years ago, you did not have mobile internet in an unfamiliar city, and it was not easy. Resisting temptation, I found an Orthodox church and made a magnificent photo reportage of the Christmas mass with my new Nikon. Then I got lost.

Two "kind" people met me in the store where I was buying a Coke and offered to show me the way to the Colosseum, which was near my hotel. We walked and talked about life. One of them fell behind a little; the other stood opposite me, and they simultaneously hit me on the head. A minute later, I woke up on the ground, feeling a stranger's hand in my jeans' pocket. They were also rummaging through my backpack nearby. "Don't kill me," I uttered an incredibly humiliating phrase. They ran off into the darkness, and I walked towards the light.

Police, ambulance, a hospital with 500 years of history on Tiber Island, no backpack, no Nikon, no passport, no smartphone, no wallet, no bank cards, no cash, no Coke.

At six in the morning, I got tired of the procedures. My mouth had already been stitched up, and I left the hospital. I crossed the Tiber, walked to the ancient Roman Circus Massimo, the hippodrome of the Roman Empire, and went to look for the Colosseum and a hotel in the light of the new day in the old alleys of the ancient city. I made a discovery: it hurts to cry because tears are salty and eat away at wounds. Smiling also hurts because my mouth was stitched shut. However, I found the key to the hotel, my only possession. I looked up, shed a tear, smiled crookedly, walked to the hotel, and began to solve problems. In the end, it is fun: a television star, the host of Moldova's main daily Russian-language talk show, almost died in Rome. Imagine the headlines in the press!

Journalism builds character. Life will tempt you and then watch your behaviour. So, you must play the long game, without getting bogged down in trifles and without compromising your integrity. After working at the newspaper, I became the youngest editor-in-chief at a news agency. Again, one day I had to make a choice and examine my conscience. In 2004, I became the youngest editor-in-chief at a news agency. After a conflict with the owners of the media holding company, I was offered the position of deputy editor-in-chief with the same salary. My mind told me to accept, but my conscience said no. Twenty years later, I proudly remember how I looked my bosses in the eyes and said no.. My mind told me to accept, but my conscience said no. Twenty years later, I proudly remember how I looked my bosses in the eyes and said no.

The lesson resulted in a year of poverty. I sold my furniture to buy food and learned to live without electricity, water, and gas. Do you know what was the most unpleasant part? The lack of water, because you need a toilet and a shower. The rest are just luxuries of civilisation.

However, I gained a certain level of discipline and ambition, and since then I have always worked on at least two projects to diversify and increase my income. After getting a job as a parliamentary observer, again in the print media, I spent several years learning corporate law on the side, and today there are only two journalists in Moldova who can write professionally about the stock market. With that, I filled one more cubicle in my brain with knowledge.

Another temptation came while working for a major 24-hour news channel. Besides being a prime-time editor, I was also a television host. Then one day, the channel changed owners and was bought by an oligarch, who began to influence editorial policy.

Perhaps you have heard about the theft of a billion euros from the Moldovan banking system and about Vlad Plahotniuc? My mind told me to keep my high salary, but my conscience said no. I left my position as a television star, but kept my reputation. Today, the former oligarch is in pre-trial detention and facing 20 years in prison.

Being a television star and prime-time editor gave me a secret to getting ratings. Now I will share it with you. Television channels closely study ratings, hold focus groups, and train in how to expand their audiences. I have my own recipe, which is radically different from the conventional ones.

Instead of expanding my audience and learning about their tastes, I narrowed down my potential audience as much as possible, to 15 to 20 people. I realised that my standards had to be at the level of an American political talk show. I had to understand American politics, speak well, and so on, so that the American president, Barack Obama, could watch me. However, I also had to master Russian and understand Russian politics, so that my work could reach Vladimir Putin as well.

Who else is watching me? My colleagues in the director's room and the newsroom. They should not be sleeping; they should be watching these interviews and talk shows! So, I must ask the questions that no one else is asking.

Several friends are also watching me. How can I make it interesting for them? My mother watches me too. Well, it is more complicated with my mother. After a particularly successful interview, I asked her, "Did you like it?" And she replied, "It was great; you were wonderful! What a beautiful tie you have!" Okay, so the tie must be good too.

So, I focused on these people. In five years of live broadcasting, I had a golden minute, the highest rating of the entire channel. At the same time, I am convinced that journalism is a collective creative endeavour. Each member of the team is not only technically necessary but contributes to the overall success.

The star syndrome is ridiculous. Once I was arguing with a female colleague in the makeup room about who should be powdered first because I was late. Then I walked out, looked at myself from the outside and promised myself, never again.

Honesty is a great asset. It is a long-term game. Modern technology allows you to achieve success without office. Nevertheless, I insist that a good journalist must be as multi-skilled as possible. My need for money and experience made me a translator, video editor, speechwriter, and voiceover artist. Each profession has its own seemingly limitless universe to be explored. For example, I can combine advertising for a Jewish restaurant and metal entrance doors in one advertising article.

Although I work on 31 December and 1 January and have no days off or vacations, I arrange mini-vacations for myself, since I went freelance a long time ago and am now working on my own media project, developing a YouTube channel. I will not ask you to subscribe to it, but you can search for the keywords *nonfiction* and *Sveatcenko*.

Why journalism? Because your life does not fade into obscurity; it is visible through texts, broadcasts, meetings, and projects. A professional amateur in all areas and a professional in the media will overcome and defeat TikTok.

Pride and responsibility

Jelena Gajic, Belgrade, Serbia

A young man lying on the street. A motorcycle beside him. Police and ambulance sirens. Crying parents. A little brother yelling at his friends, “This is all your fault. He bought a motorcycle because of you!”

I thought, “I can’t do this” and stood frozen nearby. Later I learned what it means to respect victims and their families, as stated in the Code of Journalists of Serbia, but in that moment I respected them unconsciously, simply out of fear.

I was 19 and that was my first encounter with real reporting: to write and broadcast something truthful and timely about an event that shocked me. I did not anticipate how deeply it would stay with me. Yet that incident taught me the first lesson: journalism asks you to stand steady when the world is shaking.

My journalism journey began in 2016 at a small local newsroom, RTV Mag, in my hometown of Obrenovac. It was the kind of place where every journalist reported on every topic. We were few and our studios and equipment were modern but still modest compared to big regional or national media. Yet, that small scale was, in a way, my biggest advantage. Because of the lack of senior reporters, I was given the opportunity to go out into the field on my own, to work and to learn through practice.

One day I was covering the visit of an ambassador, the next recording a pensioners' club baking cookies, and then standing in the rain reporting on a local road being paved. I learned by doing, how to choose a topic quickly, how to find the right interviewees, how to write a clear lead, where to stand in front of the camera, how to hold a microphone, and how to hide the tremble in my hand when I felt nervous and the camera was on me.

Those early years were a crash course in humility. One assignment was to interview a famous and respected actress from the so-called "old generation". I was young. I did not prepare as thoroughly as I should have. Perhaps I expected the conversation to go easily, since we were a small local newsroom and no one expected us to specialise in any topic, especially culture. When I asked my first question—a simple one about the play's plot for viewers who had not seen it—she looked at me, sighed, and said she could not answer that. I felt the air leave the room. I managed to take a breath and, despite the redness flooding my face, asked another question: "What was it about the script of this play that made you accept the role?" She shook her head, turned, and walked away.

I was shocked, embarrassed, hurt. I was angry and then ashamed. That experience stung, but it also strengthened me. It taught me that prestige and talent do not guarantee kindness, and that an early, painful rejection can become a teacher. I decided then to grow thicker skin and finer skills, to prepare better, to sharpen my questions, and keep my ego in check.

A few months later, I found myself again scheduled to interview a famous "old generation" actor, Milan "Lane" Gutović, someone my university professors had cited as an example of a difficult interviewee. We were told stories of experienced journalists who had been challenged or even reduced to tears by him. I prepared

anxiously. I read everything I could about his work. I practised questions and I rehearsed how to stay calm.

When the day came, I was trembling as I waited. I tried a different approach with him and told him openly, “We are a small local television, not specialised in any area, but rather report on everything that might interest the residents of Obrenovac.” He seemed to be fine with me trying to be honest and humble, although the questions based on my thorough preparation suggested otherwise. That evening, I was a specialist in a topic from the field of culture, at least for his monologue. To my surprise and relief, the conversation was calm, warm and instructive. Lane was friendly and at moments seemed surprised and interested in how I had prepared. That interview left me grateful and humbled. It reminded me that people are more complex than reputations and classroom warnings. Preparation and calmness can turn a feared encounter into a gift.

Those two meetings—the hurt with the actress and the gift with Lane—shaped me. They taught me that journalism is as much about the people you meet as it is about the reports you record. From those days in the field to long nights in small studios running live shows, I learned to control my voice, to hold my posture under lights, to edit quickly, and to present confidently.

I learned to accept critique, especially from editors and older colleagues. Every bit of feedback made me competent and more careful. I learned to accept that not every day or every assignment will feel meaningful, but sometimes even the simple experience of recording a village road being paved teaches discipline, patience and an eye for detail.

Between 2016 and 2020, I changed and matured in ways I could not have planned. I studied, worked, and constantly rearranged

my personal and university life to match work obligations. In the mornings, I headed to the newsroom and in the afternoons to university, or vice versa. My studies often suffered, my social life certainly did. I sometimes felt exhausted, stretched thin, and unsure why I kept going. There were times I thought about giving up. Yet, looking back, I see those years were the foundation of my confidence. Rehearsing voice-overs, moderating news pieces, and improvising to overcome technical limits taught me self-control and resilience. Those skills are not only for the microphone; they are for life.

In 2020, my career took a new path. I joined CEPROM, the Centre for Media Professionalisation and Media Literacy. At first, I contributed texts for projects. Later, my responsibilities grew: writing project proposals, coordinating activities, creating presentations, lecturing at workshops for high-school students, writing press releases, managing social media posts, composing questionnaires, preparing training materials for journalists, and even financial reporting. Although these tasks sometimes seemed far from classic reporting, I realised they were all part of the same mission, to make journalism better, more ethical, and more accessible. My role became wider, and so did my understanding of what journalism can be when it meets civil society and education.

CEPROM gave me a new way to see journalism, not only as daily reporting, but as a tool for change. I could use writing to highlight issues, from clickbait, fake news and hidden advertising to hate speech, aggressive communication and the mental health impact of social media on children. I worked on projects about artificial intelligence (AI) and how it can support people with disabilities, on initiatives that promote media literacy and more responsible journalism. I learned how storytelling could push policy conversations and build empathy.

One project that moved me deeply was our work with parents of children with developmental disabilities. Listening to their stories shifted something inside me. Their daily reality is full of constant advocacy, fear for the future, and a fight for services and understanding. I remember one mother telling me about systemic barriers that left her powerless. These were not abstract problems. They were concrete, urgent, and often invisible to the wider public. As a journalist, I had the privilege and burden of conveying their voices. Pride often came with a serious sense of responsibility: to treat those intimate narratives with care and respect, to avoid sensationalism, to never exploit pain for clicks.

Over the years, my interests widened to include ecology, economy, migration, media transformation, AI, European integration, and civic participation. I joined workshops like Economic Journalism, and took part in projects such as Ecovision, which encourages ecological thinking among young people, and Citizenship: Future is Youth, which inspired civic engagement. Each topic added a new colour to my work and what I loved most was that journalism allowed me to explore all of it. One day I could be researching nuclear energy and, the next, interviewing a paediatrician about therapy for children with sensory issues. That endless variety keeps my curiosity alive.

In 2022, I had the chance to broaden my perspective even further. I travelled to Ireland to be a part of the first cohort of the Global Migration Media Academy at the University of Galway. That summer school was a turning point. For the first time, I worked in a truly international space; journalists, students and researchers from many countries discussing migration with depth and empathy. We learned how not to reduce people to numbers, how to tell migration stories that respect dignity, and how to avoid shallow narratives that feed stereotypes. Galway taught me the importance of context, history, and the ethics of representation. It

reminded me that good journalism listens first and judges later. It also made me cherish a diversity of perspectives. I returned home with renewed purpose and friendships that still inspire my work.

In 2024 and 2025, I also recorded several audio podcast episodes for *Svedoci (The Witnesses)* and *Povezani horizonti (Connected Horizons)* on the platform Podcast.rs. It was a natural continuation of my curiosity, another format through which stories could be told. After years of working for television and writing for print and online media, podcasting felt like completing a circle. It allowed me to combine various skills—interviewing, listening, writing, and editing—in a more conversational way. I enjoyed the informality of it, the chance to let guests talk freely and share their thoughts without the pressure of time or camera lights. It reminded me how many forms journalism can take and how each of them, in its own way, gives us space to explore, learn, and connect.

Journalism in Serbia is not an easy profession. The field has been degraded in many ways, with ethical standards being forgotten and journalists facing pressure, humiliation, or even threats and attacks. Investigative reporting is risky and often underfunded. Many colleagues are financially insecure. This reality does not discourage me but motivates me to do more than "just" reporting. That is one reason I stayed at CEPROM and moved into project coordination, to conduct training, to research challenges, and to build solutions. If journalism is to survive as a public good, we must support journalists by teaching new skills like sustainable business models, creating new media forms, or ethical uses of AI, and by strengthening media literacy so that the public can recognise quality reporting.

Through all these years, one steady companion has been self-doubt. I still read my published pieces and think I could have done better. I criticise myself for not asking one more question, for

not giving more space to a source, for not making the narrative clearer. Yet, this doubt keeps me being honest with myself. It balances pride and reminds me to improve. Public work brings pride, the knowledge that your words can influence people, spark empathy, and even affect decision-makers. However, it also brings fear, fear of causing harm, of being misunderstood, of failing those whose trust you carry.

The best parts of journalism always come down to people. I have met parents who shared their fears about their children's uncertain future, high school students who spoke with incredible honesty about how media shape their views, and elderly citizens who proudly showed me projects they built on their own. Those encounters shaped me. They reminded me why I chose this profession; journalism allows you to enter other people's worlds for a moment, to learn from them, and to help others see what you have seen. They deepen my empathy and expand my knowledge. I have met people who disappointed me and people who humbled me with their kindness. I have been surprised again and again by the generosity of strangers who open their homes and share their hardest moments with me.

If I could speak to my 19-year-old self, the girl who stood frozen on the street, I would say, "You will survive the fear. Your 'I can't do this' will appear many times, but each time it will teach you something important. Learn, prepare, listen, and never stop being curious, being yourself." I would tell her it is okay to have doubts, but not to let them silence her. I would tell her that the work is worth the cost: the small "thank you" from a listener, the quiet satisfaction of closing a piece that matters, the knowledge that a story you told helped someone feel less alone.

I still get nervous before an interview. I still second-guess a sentence. But, when a parent in one of our projects says, "Thank

you for addressing this topic" or when a reader writes that an article helped them, those moments are everything. They remind me that the work matters. They remind me why I started standing on that street nine years ago, why I stay, and why I keep going.

Journalism gave me skills and a livelihood, but more importantly, it gave me compassion. It taught me to ask questions, to listen, to connect, and to remain honest with myself and others. It is not just a profession, but a way of life.

I still sometimes think, "I can't do this." However, now that feeling means something else. It means I care. It means the story matters. So, I continue, asking, learning, and telling. Every story we tell is a small attempt to make sense of the world, and to make the world more understandable to one another. When the workday ends and the pressures of deadlines fade, I often think of that first day and the boy on the street. I am still that same person who once thought, "I can't do this." Only now I know that sometimes that very thought leads me to the story most worth telling.

Stories from the margins

Lorin Kadiu, Tirana, Albania

Near midnight, after a long day at work. Finally at home, trying to get some rest in front of the television. The phone vibrates once, one notification, then another, then tens, hundreds, all with the same text: "Your content was removed."

I remember the exact feeling. It was like someone had broken in and stolen years of collective work and sacrifice. Everything was being taken, quietly, without warning. I felt the urge to go out and walk, hoping to relieve the feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness sitting in my chest, a feeling that refused to leave for a long time.

"Why journalism?" I have been asked in interviews, at conferences, by colleagues, by family and strangers. I never had a clear answer. It has always been long, messy and confusing, and definitely not the classic one. It was not a childhood dream, and I cannot say I always knew. If anything, I might say the opposite.

During university, many of my peers seemed to have a clear purpose, chasing visibility, big media jobs, prime-time television, breaking news, and spotlights. That world never attracted me, maybe because I am introverted. I mostly feel at home in one-to-one conversations, listening to stories that come only after people get past the awkwardness of silence, the camera, the performance. Maybe journalism found me there.

"I am used to being on the other side of the camera," I still say before giving any interview, as if it helps shake off the anxiety that has not disappeared entirely, even after all these years.

I did not have a camera until much later. In the beginning, I only had an old laptop and a voice recorder I had received as a gift. After classes, I worked evenings at a bar as a bartender and sports-bet operator. During the slow hours, I kept imagining a desk of my own, a simple workstation where I could write and learn editing instead of counting slips and serving drinks. I dreamed of getting into journalism.

I fantasised about throwing away my old laptop with its 15-minute battery life. It failed me during a family trip to the beach. I carried with me the interviews, the intro, the outro, thinking I would edit one of my first podcasts on mental health near the sea. The image made me proud before I even started. However, everything went wrong. The laptop overheated and shut down every few minutes. Later I learned that even the best equipment fails, and when it does you must still try to save the story. Even if it is not perfect, even if you think it does not shine, you still finish it.

My first job as a journalist was in a newsroom focused on human rights. Reporting on marginalised groups humbled me. It forced me to see society differently, to listen for long hours to people you might have overlooked as a child or teenager. I remember one of the first reports: visiting a settlement near the artificial lake of Tirana where Roma and Egyptian families lived in makeshift shelters. The municipality decided to "reforest" the area after some residents complained about noise and smoke, after the families lit fires at night to keep warm.

I will never forget the fear in the parents' eyes as the police arrived to evict them. "Free transport back to your hometown," they were

told, a solution for a five-member family living under a plastic sheet printed, ironically, with old political campaign slogans.

It was the first time I saw the force of the state up close, with only my camera between me and what was happening. No other journalists were around. It was just me, with the responsibility of telling what I witnessed. Later in my career, I would see hundreds of clashes, house demolitions, violent evictions, tear gas, and military police, but I still cannot shake the memory of that first moment.

That is when journalism stopped being an exercise or a school assignment. It took time to convince myself that what I did mattered, that journalism can exist far from the spotlights of big television studios. Your work in a small newsroom matters, especially when you are the only journalist present. It mattered even more because most outlets preferred to sit in party headquarters or parliamentary buildings instead of on the margins, where life is loudest.

I was 20, curious, restless, wanting to see the world and learn everything I could. Between the excitement of free plane tickets, something I could not afford otherwise, I took part in workshops on radio storytelling, multimedia and mobile reporting, and investigative journalism. I joined Deutsche Welle's Balkan Booster program for young journalists from the Western Balkans and filmed my first mobile journalism reports using their kit. Later, I built the same kit for every journalist in our newsroom. Those experiences gave me confidence that journalism could start anywhere, even with just a phone, a microphone, and a bit of courage.

During one of my travels, I found myself at The Boston Globe, as part of a young journalists' exchange between the USA and

Albania. I had waited for weeks for one specific meeting on the programme: the session with the Spotlight team. I had imagined it a hundred times, how they would look, what I would ask.

The real team looked nothing like the Hollywood movie. Just a cluster of desks in a corner of the newsroom, ordinary reporters who had done extraordinary work. I returned to Albania with a model in my head: big stories do not need big lights. They need persistence and quiet discipline.

Not long after that trip, Ervin, my mentor and former professor, and Mariola, who led the founding of Citizens Channel trusted me to lead this new media project in Tirana. At 23, I was given the title of "Executive Director." I still hold it uncomfortably and try to hide it whenever possible. Looking back, the conditions I thought were extraordinary at the time were actually far from ideal. A six-month budget, a small room, three old desks, one camera, one microphone. Half my salary went to rent.

We built a tiny newsroom of two people. We each had to fulfil multiple roles. I would film on the field, record interviews, then return to the office for long editing sessions and uploads that took forever, every day until late at night. At first by bicycle, then on a small 50cc Vespa packed with tripods, microphones, cables, and bags: an entire crew of one person.

In a strange way, the work felt like healing. It was an escape from a period of loneliness, a time of trial and learning, wearing every hat: administrator, website manager, journalist, editor, cameraman. If something did not work, you did not complain; you just learned a way to fix it.

During the first period, nothing came easily. Albania was not a friendly environment for small media, especially those led

by young people. We counted every like, visit, view, share, and comment as a significant achievement. For years, we were known as “the students’ media” and “the young journalists learning the job”. Those labels followed us longer than I expected.

Slowly, a team formed around the mission: Fjori, Erisa, Entenela, Moku; then Elira, Arbjona, Olta, Herti and Erblin. Proudly, the youngest newsroom in Tirana. A group that joined and stayed not for money or fame, but for the belief that real journalism can still be done here: clean, uncorrupted, independent, not serving anyone’s interests.

The first and most important achievement was building the Citizens team. Slowly, we started consolidating and dividing roles. Long discussions led to a point at which we needed work that carried our signature. That is how Urban Stories was born, the initiative closest to my heart. For years, we had watched Tirana transform violently. The city of my childhood was being erased and sold piece by piece. We decided to document what was left before it disappeared.

Weeks of information requests and research about cultural heritage archives were met with silence or institutional arrogance. So, we decided to build the database ourselves. We walked street by street, knocked on doors, photographed, filmed, and asked questions. The Citizens team documented more than 60 former heritage villas, buildings we had passed by our whole lives without ever really seeing them. The mission was clear: even if we lose the physical city, at least we can preserve it digitally.

Urban Stories grounded us in the city’s past, but protests pushed us into its present. Journalism at Citizens has always followed the roots of resistance. Our work is shaped by the places where people stand their ground.

It started with the student protests of 2018, the largest the country had seen in years. Then came the National Theatre, the miners' protests, labour rights demonstrations, and the resistance against hydropower plants across Albania, from the north to the south. Hundreds of hours of footage, thousands of voices in front of our microphones. We were there when tear gas burned our lungs, when stones flew across the boulevard, when the anger and exhaustion of people facing police violence filled the air.

Next to the big television crews with huge cameras and tripods, there was always a journalist with a mobile phone and a gimbal. Our team was there in small villages where only a handful of residents protested, in factories, mines, Pride marches, student assemblies, hospitals, pensioners' gatherings, pushing ourselves toward the impossible mission: we will be anywhere people ask to be seen.

Over time, our presence in the communities, showing up, returning, and being there with the people, started to translate into trust. A small group of young journalists slowly built a media that people relied on. Our reporting reached millions of people each year, not because we were louder, but because we were present. Our stories travelled further than we first imagined. Citizens.al became a credible source for local and international media, shaping public debates, and being recognized through journalism awards. This never felt like individual success, rather a confirmation that persistence and responsibility, practiced honestly, can leave a good trace.

Back to that same midnight. The flood of notifications: "Your content was removed." I barely slept. Every attempt to fix the issue failed. I did not know what was happening and, worse, I could not stop it. By morning, hundreds of people had received the same message. Everything they had ever shared from Citizens had disappeared from their profiles. Our website went dark.

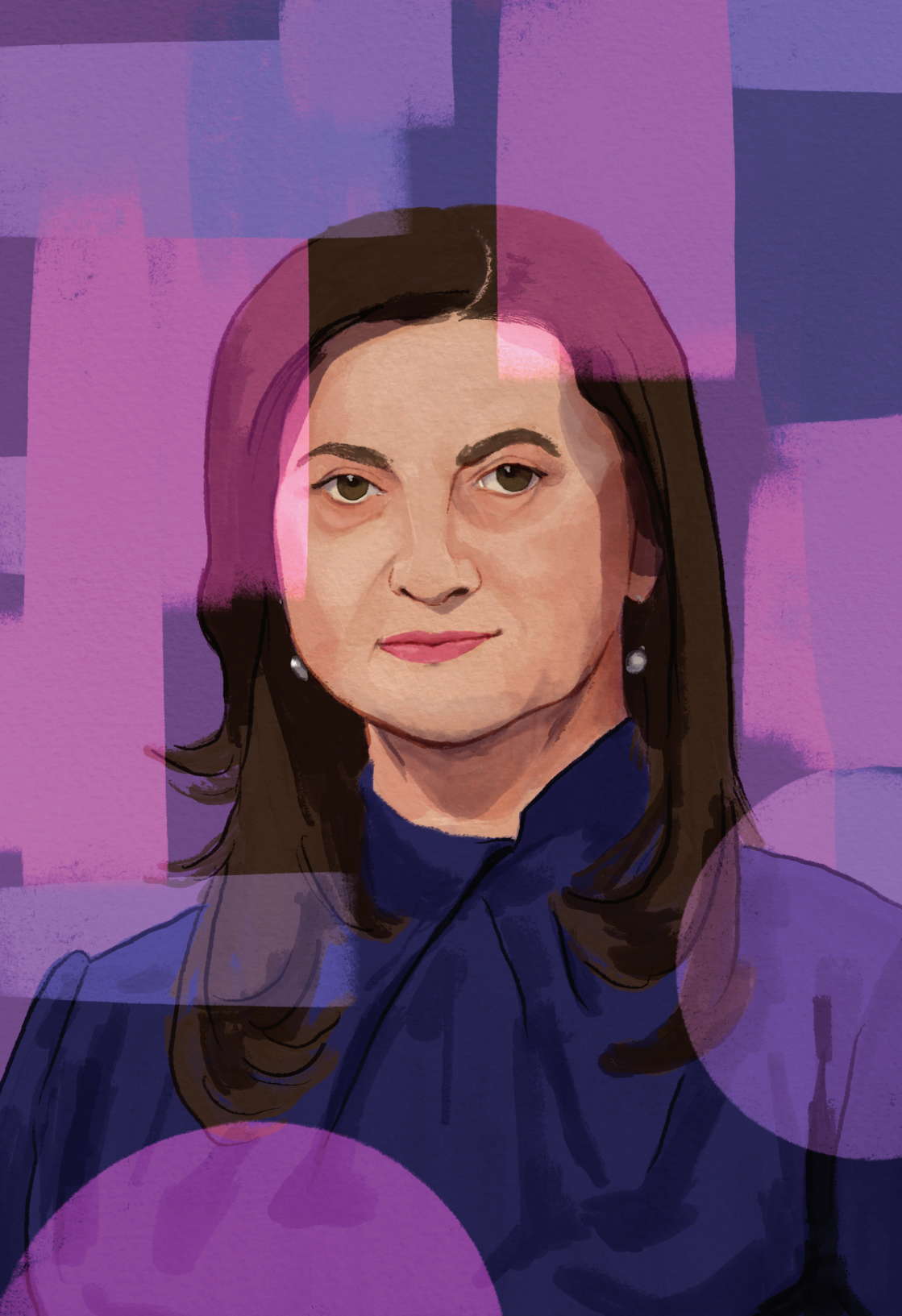
Subdomains vanished. We still have not rebuilt our Urban Stories page. Our entire online presence had been erased in hours. Tens of thousands of fake followers flooded our social media accounts. It was a coordinated attack designed to bury us.

That is when we understood we could not fight it on equal terms. Our defences were modest, our budget fragile, against an opponent who was spending thousands to silence us.

Still, we did not stop publishing, not for a single day. With stubbornness, we posted the news as plain text on Facebook, the only place left where we could still share information. Dozens and then hundreds of messages of solidarity arrived. Help came without us asking. Slowly, we stood up again, recovered what we could, rebuilt what had vanished. We are still trying to restore all that was lost.

Over these years at Citizens, I have tried to teach people what I learned the hard way, when I had to do everything alone. The shift was huge, from a solitary multitasker to an editor who wants others to shine. The pride of doing everything myself was replaced by the satisfaction of seeing the newsroom become *we*, not *me*. As a team, we have learned from one another. Some of our best stories were made with nothing more than a phone and a microphone, because that was all we needed to earn people's trust. Slowly, journalism became less about the stories I personally produced and more about creating a space where others could speak freely.

Somewhere in these years of learning, teaching, failing, rebuilding, and still showing up, the answer to "why journalism?" became less of a question. It lives in the small victories, in the stubbornness to continue, in the people who showed up and stayed, in the fact that, even when we were wiped off the internet in one night, we still opened the newsroom the next morning and kept publishing.



I will keep going

Cristina Cileacu, Bucharest, Romania

– You journalists are always frustrated because you are always searching for the truth, and it is the hardest thing to find. –

That is what my best friend told me in a conversation he started many years ago. He wanted to know why I liked this job so much, but he started with his own conclusion. I was just starting out and talked almost exclusively about work every day.

"And you're also a bit superficial", he continued, "because you research when you take on a subject. You're like hunting dogs; you find things. But you don't analyse what you discover, you don't come up with solutions, because that's not really your job."

No one likes to hear that they are frustrated and somewhat superficial, although we all are. I stared into my coffee cup, which suddenly seemed more interesting than the philosophy of the meaning of journalism. I could hear him talking, but my mind was preoccupied with the two words: frustrated and superficial.

What he did not understand, and neither did I at the time, was that journalism never allows you to feel complete. There is always one more question. An angle you have not explored. A voice you have not listened to. The truth is a bird in flight: the moment you think you have caught it, it has already slipped through your fingers. Yes, maybe we are never fulfilled. Yet, maybe that is what keeps us alive.

"I don't think people pay journalism a greater compliment than when they tell us 'never stop'", I finally replied.

My friend raised an eyebrow provocatively.

"You're wearing yourself out. You'll age quickly."

"Probably. But I'll be satisfied."

He laughed. Not at me, but at what he called "my professional naiveté". Yet, it was not naiveté. It was faith. Or stubbornness. The difference is small. Journalism is not a profession for those seeking peace and quiet. It is for those who cannot live without meaning.

There is a wonderful paradox in this profession: it eats away at you and fulfils you at the same time. It is hard. Sometimes terribly so. You get insults, attacks, and suspicious looks. You encounter procrastination, passive-aggressive behaviour, institutions that guard their papers like their most precious possession. "We have no information." "The person in charge is not available." "Come back with an email." You feel like screaming; but you do not. Because you know that, beyond these walls, the story needs to be told. So, you keep going. You continue with a strange stubbornness, born of having seen too often what happens when you say nothing.

It was the first day of my life as a journalist when someone wrote to me: "Thank you, my child is now going to school and has everything he needs." It was just a report by a rookie journalist, but I understood. I am not frustrated. I am in the process.

Journalism does not just make you feel fulfilled in the newsroom or at press conferences. Most of the time, it throws you into the

world as it really is: cruel, broken, unfair. When I first arrived at a refugee camp, I understood what responsibility really means. Not to an editor. Not to an audience. To people. There were mothers holding their children in their arms after days of walking. Men who had lost everything they had. Children who did not even know what country they were in. I did not see statistics in front of me; I saw lives on hold. I said to myself that I was the last thing they needed in their lives, showing up with a microphone and a camera, asking them to put their suffering into words. The refugee children got me out of my jam. They surrounded the film crew, curious to discover the camera, jumping in front of it and rejoicing: photo! Madam, photo! My cameraman colleague let them press the buttons on the camera, showed them fragments of the footage in which they appeared on the display, and their joy was sincere. The mothers of those children were even more delighted because, for a moment, the war had disappeared and normal life was back.

That is when I understood that journalism is not about the journalist. It is not about how affected you are. It is not about how much risk you take. Journalism is about the people you see and whom others do not want to see. There is no applause here. There is no podium. There are no medals. You are not a hero. You are just the eye that observes and the voice that transmits.

How do you talk to a group of women who have survived the horrors of Darfur? Nothing can prepare you for when they begin telling their stories. My reaction to these terrible realities is physical at first. My jaw locks and I can no longer articulate words properly. Then it occurs to me: by comparison, I am without problems. After that, outrage sets in, and I want to do everything I can to ensure the world knows what those women have been through.

Journalists do not change the world with grand statements, but with small gestures: a well-asked question, an image captured at the right moment, a report written with respect. Sometimes people find it hard to understand why you keep going. Why do you need to go there? Why do you return to conflict zones? Why do you take the risk of being where others are afraid to look?

The simple truth is this: because someone has to go. Someone has to see. Someone has to write. Someone has to bear witness. The journalist is not the protagonist. He is the witness of the world.

Years later, my friend remained silent after hearing stories about refugees. He tried to joke around but it was clear that something had affected him.

"It is hard; I couldn't do that."

"No one knows if they can do that. We journalists live on contradictions."

He raised his hands in the air, in surrender.

"But I still don't understand why you don't let something else fulfil you. Why don't you choose a normal job, where no one swears at you, where you see less evil?"

"Because the world changes if you look at it closely enough."

There is a subtle moment that makes all the difference. It is the moment you find the key piece of information after days of searching. When you manage to turn chaos into understanding. When the subject sits down in front of you and you know you are about to say something that matters. It is like nothing else. It is an intellectual adrenaline rush. You no longer care that you ate on

the run, that the phone rang nonstop, that someone called you a "fake news seller". You have grasped the thread of truth and, for a few seconds, you feel what some call fulfilment. I call it peace.

There are days when personal peace is disturbed. I was the subject of fake news, spread by a former prime minister of my country. In the midst of the Israel-Hamas war, in Romania, I had become the subject of discussion. I was on a live broadcast when a bomb alarm went off. I lay down on the ground, according to the protocol in the area, continued to report, and when the alarm was about to end, two food delivery men on bikes passed by me. That fragment was cut out and posted on TikTok with the title "the lying journalist mimics war". World celebrity is a mild expression for the wave of hate that was unleashed, but the international press stood by me to debunk the fake news. Even now, however, there are still occasional comments such as, "Isn't that the one who mimed war?"

The subject remains the conflict in which tens of thousands of people died and which, unfortunately, was not mimed at all.

For years, I have talked about journalism with my friend, almost daily. He no longer views me as a friend with a complicated job, but as someone who knows their place in the world.

"You know", he said, "you were really lucky because journalism chose you."

"No", I laughed. "I chose it because I'm "a bit superficial", remember?" Our old joke always finds its way in conversations.

"No", he insisted. "If you had chosen it, you would have given up long ago."

He was right. He was right long before I admitted it. Because, when I was just starting out, unsure of myself, making mistakes at every turn, he was there to tell me:

"Keep going. This is what you know how to do."

Against eradication

Tako Robakidze, Tbilisi, Georgia

I did not grow up thinking I would become a journalist. I grew up listening to adults whisper memories they were not yet ready to face, to relatives who carried their homes inside them after being forced to leave everything behind. As a child, I believed that, if people simply knew these stories, something would change quickly. I imagined truth as something direct and immediate. Years later, I understood that truth does not erase injustice overnight. However, it anchors memory. In a country like Georgia, memory is not just recollection; it is a quiet form of safekeeping, a way to protect what Russia is trying to erase.

My relationship with journalism began long before I recognised it. It began in my childhood, in the fragile years after the wars of the 1990s. I was born in the last years of the Soviet Union and grew up during conflict and deep uncertainty, without electricity or gas, and surrounded by stories of injustice, human rights violations, and resistance. Those years shaped the emotional geography of my childhood.

In the 1990s, following the Soviet collapse, Russian-backed separatists in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region launched wars to claim independence from Georgia. Nearly 300 000 people were displaced; it was a national trauma. Some of those displaced were my own relatives. They lived with us. Their voices, their memories, their grief shaped the soundscape of our home. I grew up not only

hearing but inhabiting their stories, stories of homelands they could no longer walk in, of houses left intact but unreachable, of schools, churches, orchards, friendships, and love torn apart by war.

These stories were not abstractions. They were woven into the rhythm of daily life. My parents, both doctors, worked in hospitals that became makeshift shelters after the war. Many internally displaced families were placed in empty rooms, sometimes several families sharing one ward. After kindergarten, I spent my afternoons in the hospital where my mother worked. I played in long corridors with children who, like my relatives, had been forced to leave everything behind. It felt almost magical. Adults cared for us with unusual tenderness. We shared food and toys. We laughed loudly in a place usually filled with quiet suffering. The ninth floor of the hospital became an extended family. Only much later did I understand that this extended family existed only because so much had been taken from them.

As I grew older, these impressions stayed with me. They became questions I could not ignore. I felt compelled to do something about the unease these stories left inside me, to confront the injustice embedded in the social fabric around us. I thought law would give me the tools to do that, so I chose to study it. I believed that understanding legal structures would help me address the wounds I had grown up witnessing. However, during my studies, I realised something unsettling: few people in Georgia or abroad understood the depth of what Georgians had endured through Russian wars and occupation. The stories that defined our society were known only in fragments. The country, exhausted by economic hardship and instability, rarely had space to process its past. Our trauma lived mostly in private conversation, not in public understanding. Because the international community did not see or understand these experiences, Georgia remained

largely absent from the global narrative of suffering and resistance.

This realisation struck me forcefully when I visited an internally displaced persons settlement in Tskaltubo, one of the many abandoned Soviet sanatoriums where displaced families from Abkhazia region had been placed “temporarily” in the 1990s. Decades later, they were still there. These “temporary” accommodations had become permanent waiting rooms. Walking through those corridors of dilapidated buildings felt like stepping back into my childhood. The faded walls, the damp smell of the old buildings, the sense of suspended lives, it was as if the years had folded into a single moment. I had grown, changed, left; I had choices. They had remained in the same place, in the same conditions, awaiting a resolution that never came.

In that moment, injustice became something tangible, something I could smell, see, and touch. It was no longer a historical narrative; it was the present. Something took root in me that day: these stories needed to be told over and over, with care and depth. They needed to be documented so that they could not be dismissed or forgotten. It felt less like a decision and more like an obligation that had quietly been forming inside me since childhood, an obligation to carry these stories forward.

I completed my law degree, but my direction had shifted. I turned towards journalism and documentary photography. Photography became the language that matched what I carried inside me. It allowed me to express thoughts, emotions, and truths that words alone could not contain. A face behind barbed wire, a landscape fractured by occupation, a gesture of quiet defiance, these images create a bridge between the viewer and the person photographed. They give shape to experiences that might otherwise remain unseen. Photography holds silence, grief, and

resilience within a single frame. Paired with text, it becomes a record, a safeguard against erasure.

For more than 15 years, I have documented the human consequences of Russian occupation: families separated by barbed wire, people living near the so-called "border" with the occupied Tskhinvali region, communities threatened by creeping annexation, and children stripped of their language in the Abkhazia region. I have seen the ongoing attempts to erase Georgian culture and memory, and I have witnessed everyday resistance unfolding in the shadow of violence and propaganda.

Documenting these experiences, visually and through personal testimony, became my way of revealing how complex the occupation is, and how Georgia mirrors the patterns Russia applies elsewhere, including Ukraine. The same methods, the same psychological strategies, the same KGB-inherited logic of destabilisation and cultural destruction. These stories form part of a larger map of violence, a map that must be understood if we hope to prevent its repetition. My work became an attempt to build a continuous line from the present back through history, exposing the unbroken logic of Russia's methods.

Indeed, Russian occupation in Georgia has recurred across centuries, following a familiar sequence: propaganda and disinformation, military intervention, and the uprooting of culture, especially language. In the nineteenth century, after annexation, the Russian Empire shut down Georgian-language schools and abolished the autocephaly of the Georgian Church, installing a Russian exarch to undermine identity at its source. Georgia's brief independence from 1918 to 1921 ended with the Red Army invasion. By 1924, the uprisings were crushed by censorship and historical revisionism. During Soviet rule, Russian dominated the administration, education, and scientific discourse, while Georgian

voices were reshaped to fit ideological narratives. In 1978, tens of thousands marched in Tbilisi to defend Georgian as the state language, a testament to how deeply language anchors survival.

After Georgia regained independence in 1991, Russia destabilised the country through wars in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region, displacing nearly 300 000 ethnic Georgians and leaving 20% of the territory effectively under Russian control. The 2008 war deepened this division: Russia recognised the occupied regions as "independent" and established permanent bases. What appeared to be a short conflict was actually a continuation of slower, ongoing violence. Since 2011, the process known as "borderisation" has cut through gardens, homes, and families. More than 3500 civilians have been detained for "illegal crossings", many within their own yards on Georgian-controlled land. In the Abkhazia region, Georgian-language education was dismantled year by year until, by 2021, every school operated only in Russian, a deliberate attempt to sever the next generation from its cultural roots. This pattern reappeared in Ukraine on an even more devastating scale after the full-scale invasion began.

Over time, my work also became a way to preserve truth within Georgia itself. Today, a government openly aligned with Russia attempts to rewrite history, shift blame, and cast doubt on established facts. In this environment, stories, images, and testimonies have become what stands between fact and erasure.

For many years, I worked in the so-called border regions. Gradually, the same patterns began appearing in Tbilisi. Repression moved inward. Friends and colleagues were detained for speaking openly or demanding justice. The tactics I had studied for years arrived at the centre of our public life. The distance between my work and my everyday experience disappeared. Russian influence has deeply penetrated Georgia's

political system. In 2023, Kremlin-inspired laws targeting NGOs, media, and LGBTQ+ communities, including the Transparency of Foreign Influence bill, triggered mass protests. The parliamentary elections of 26 October 2024 were marred by intimidation, violence, and fraud. On 28 November, the Prime Minister unexpectedly halted EU accession talks. Since then, the political crisis has only deepened. New repressive laws have been introduced. Protesters and opposition figures have been targeted. Over 500 demonstrators have been arrested amid growing reports of police brutality. More than 70 political prisoners remain behind bars, including the first woman journalist imprisoned in independent Georgia, Mzia Amaghlobeli, along with nearly all major opposition leaders. State-controlled media relentlessly discredit protest movements, cultural values, and the West, creating a clash between reality and the Russian version of it.

Despite the immense pressure, journalists in Georgia continue to report. During protests, they stand in the streets with little protection. They live-stream events as they unfold. They investigate corruption in an environment in which transparency is punished. Their work helps the public discern truth. The results are visible. Despite propaganda, repression, and manufactured confusion, people still recognise what is real. For more than a year, Georgians have protested daily. Tens of thousands attend major demonstrations. This persistence did not appear on its own; it was built through years of documentation, reporting, and the eyes of the public. The population has not succumbed to propaganda; most people remain clear-eyed about what is happening. To me, this is the clearest answer to why journalism matters: because allowing those in power to define reality for everyone is worse, because journalism is one of the few ways to stay anchored when lies spread faster than facts. It is one of the few tools that enable us to hold on to what is real when the public narrative becomes distorted.

For me, journalism is not only about collecting facts. It is also about transmitting facts through emotional resonance, creating the connection that helps people understand, empathise, and care. Facts can be ignored. Emotional truth rarely can. Emotional truth resists manipulation, strengthens empathy, and builds solidarity.

This is why I do journalism. Not because I believe in immediate transformation, but because I have understood from my experience that stories endure. Because memory must be tended to. Because silence is never neutral. Because the people whose stories shaped me, my relatives, the children I played with in hospital corridors, the families in Tskaltubo, the villagers living under occupation, the friends detained for speaking honestly, deserve to be remembered. Because truthful facts, preserved with care, can one day serve justice and help future generations understand the patterns of violence, manipulation, and imperial ambition that Russia continues to deploy across the region.

There were moments in my life when I doubted journalism, not because truth lost its significance, but because the industry itself often fails. It can sensationalise suffering, be careless with people's dignity, or align itself with power. Nevertheless, those moments only clarified why journalism remains essential. Even when institutions falter, the purpose of journalism, to document, to create a record, to maintain accountability, does not disappear.

The work I do, I hope, will one day serve my child and his generation. It will remain as documentary evidence and as an emotional bridge to the past, something essential for remembering, and a way of understanding the country they will inherit.

About the Authors

Božidar Milovac comes from Serbia and works as a reporter for the local news website Radio 021 and the news agency Beta. He is also a contributor to the BBC and *Deutsche Welle* and is a Master's student at the University of Novi Sad.

Kristina Atovska is an award-winning journalist and filmmaker from North Macedonia. She reported on the war against Ukraine, and her documentary Siren Lullabies won over 12 international awards.

Andrey Vladov is a Bulgarian journalist based in London with over 30 years of experience working across radio, new media and television. He has worked for the BBC World Service, BBC Monitoring and BBC Media Action as a reporter, presenter, producer, senior monitoring journalist, online writer/editor, deputy head of a language service and executive editor.

Barçın Yinanç is a foreign policy specialist from Türkiye with more than 30 years of professional experience. After working as a diplomatic reporter earlier in her career, she is now the foreign policy analyst at the news website T24.

Mihail Nesteriuc comes from Moldova and works as a correspondent for the Polish public television project *Vot Tak Moldova*, where he covers disinformation and European integration in Moldova for a Russian-speaking audience.

Getoarbë Mulliqi serves as the Executive Director of the Association of Journalists of Kosovo, as well as a researcher for the Safe Journalists Network. She has been the lead author of key reports on media freedom and journalists' safety in Kosovo.

Adelin Petrisor is one of Romania's best-known war correspondents, with almost 30 years of experience in journalism. He has covered wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Israel, Lebanon and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and has produced documentaries about Guantanamo Prison and North Korea.

Ana Brakus leads the *Faktograf Association* in Croatia as its Executive Director. From 2018 to 2021, she worked as an author and editor at the *Faktograf.hr* portal, and previously at the feminist portal *Libela.org* and the weekly newspaper *Novosti*.

David Karaivanov works as an international news editor and reporter at bTV News. He began his career as an intern in the News and Current Affairs Department of Bulgaria's public broadcaster and later worked as a television reporter.

Nataliya Gumenyuk is a Ukrainian journalist and author focusing on international relations and human rights. She is the founder and CEO of the Public Interest Journalism Lab. She regularly writes for The Guardian, Foreign Affairs and The Atlantic, and has been published in Rolling Stone, Vanity Fair, New Lines Magazine and *Die Zeit*.

Mladen Čadikovski is an editor and media professional from North Macedonia with nearly three decades of experience in leading outlets, including A1, *Fokus*, TV24 and *Telma*. His work spans political and economic reporting, debate formats and documentary projects.

Kristina Baxanova is the Head of International News at bTV, one of Bulgaria's leading private television channels, and is the host of the current affairs show bTV World. She has worked as a reporter and anchor for bTV News since its inception in 2000.

Ivan Sveatcenko is a political journalist and interviewer from Moldova. He has worked in media since 1995, across newspapers, magazines and radio. He hosts and produces his own media project on YouTube, called Nonfiction.

Jelena Gajić comes from Serbia and works as a journalist and communication professional with experience in television, online media, public relations and civil society projects. She combines her journalistic background with initiatives supporting more ethical and responsible media.

Lorin Kadiu, from Albania, serves as the director of Citizens.al, an independent newsroom dedicated to documenting civic resistance in Albania. He has led the production of award-winning investigative work, including documentaries and podcast series *(Zëra, Pezull, Të Padëgjuarit)*.

Cristina Cileacu works in foreign affairs reporting and production at Digi24, Romania, specialising in international diplomacy and global politics. She is the producer and host of Diplomatic Passport.

Tako Robakidze is a Georgian journalist and documentary photographer. She is a National Geographic explorer and a Magnum Foundation fellow. Her long-term research focuses on the human impact of the ongoing Russian occupation of Georgia.