

Journalism Innovation Under Autocratization: Comparing Journalistic Resistance in Poland and Slovakia

SIMONE BENAZZO¹

Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

Scholars have long recognized that silencing independent media and capturing the public sphere are top priorities for autocratizers. Independent media, however, have reacted. As autocratizing governments increase attacks on media freedom, innovation becomes crucial for devising practices of resistance. This study analyzes innovative journalism practices in two European Union countries with contrasting political trajectories: Poland, where the liberal opposition ousted the autocratizing government led by Prawo i Sprawiedliwość in 2023, and Slovakia, where autocratizing leader Robert Fico won parliamentary elections in the same year. To address the research question “How have independent media and critical journalists reacted to the actions autocratizing governments in Poland and Slovakia have taken to limit media freedom?” the contribution relies on 30 semistructured interviews with local journalists and experts, mapping the coping mechanisms these actors have implemented to respond to the challenge of autocratization. Findings show that the main innovations concern institutionalizing and routinizing structural cooperation, unionizing and establishing journalism associations, and launching financially independent media and journalistic projects. There are also signs of a trend of Europeanization of both autocratization and journalistic resistance.

Keywords: journalism, autocratization, resistance, Poland, Slovakia

Recognizing the strategic importance of media capture for illiberal leaders in European Union (EU) countries, EU institutions have gradually embraced a proactive role in safeguarding media freedom within the bloc. Recent developments include the introduction of ambitious legislative measures such as the European Media Freedom Act and the Anti-SLAPP Directive (Fierens, Le Cam, Domingo, & Benazzo, 2023).

These top-down initiatives, though, have not been the only responses to the decline of media freedom in autocratizing EU countries. Independent media organizations have also mobilized and resisted

Simone Benazzo: simone.benazzo@ulb.be

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measures meant to undermine their capacity to hold power accountable, yet these grassroots forms of journalistic resistance have largely been overlooked by academic research.

This study aims to shed light on this phenomenon. It starts by drawing a state of the art of the topic of journalistic resistance to autocratization. It then introduces the research question and the case selection: Poland and Slovakia. The subsequent section presents the main findings, gathered through 30 semistructured interviews with journalists and experts in both countries.

The three main practices of resistance that emerged—institutionalizing and routinizing structural cooperation, unionizing and establishing journalism associations, and launching financially independent media and journalistic projects—are then critically discussed through the extant literature. By delving into the comparison, the analysis shows how autocratization has pushed independent media to innovate in a hybrid media environment where their societal role is questioned and increasingly institutionalized “alternative media” profit from political polarization.

Finally, the conclusion elaborates on a crucial topic for future research: the growing Europeanization of journalistic resistance. As autocratizers in the EU collaborate to spread their “authoritarian practices” (Glasius, 2018) and support each other, independent media have started to engage in cross-border cooperation and consolidate transnational solidarity networks.

Autocratization and Journalistic Resistance

Mostly thanks to the yearly reports published by the V-Dem Institute, the phenomenon of autocratization—defined as “a process of regime change towards autocracy that makes politics increasingly exclusive and monopolistic, and political power increasingly repressive and arbitrary” (Cassani & Tomini, 2020, p. 277)—has recently attracted significant scholarly attention in comparative politics.

Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) note that, compared to the widely used concept of democratic backsliding, the concept of autocratization is better suited to capture a wide spectrum of political transitions. As the authors point out,

Some scholars have suggested democratic backsliding to denote the diminishing of democratic traits. [. . .] we find the use of term backsliding problematic for three reasons: First, democratic backsliding implies a decline “in terms of” democracy and thus a conceptual extension beyond the democratic regime spectrum would border to conceptual stretching. [. . .] Second, the term suggests that regimes slide “back” to where they were before whereas in reality they may develop in a new direction, to a different form of authoritarianism for example. Finally, “sliding” makes it sound like an involuntary, unconscious process, which does not do justice to conscious actions political actors take in order to change a regime. It simply invokes the wrong kind of notion about the process. (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1099)

Conversely, the concept of autocratization enables *researchers* to unpack not only the “*pars destruens* (i.e. the end of an existing regime)” but also “the *pars construens* (i.e. the installation of a new regime)” of a political transition (Cassani & Tomini, 2020, p. 277).

Crucially, within the flourishing academic debate on autocratization, a subresearch agenda on resistance has recently developed (Bermeo, 2022; Fossati, 2023; Tomini, Gibril, & Bochev, 2022). When unpacking patterns and coalitions of resistance, however, scholars have mainly focused on the political opposition (Gamboa, 2017, 2022; Ilonszki & Dudzińska, 2021; Panzano, Benazzo, & Bochev, 2024), the judiciary (Puleo & Coman, 2023; Zambrano, da Silva, Miron, & Rodríguez, 2024), and civil society (Mietzner, 2021; Rakner, 2021).

Journalists and media, albeit often mentioned as key players for democratic resilience (Boese, Edgell, Hellmeier, Maerz, & Lindberg, 2021; Laebens & Lührmann, 2021; Merkel & Lührmann, 2021), have mostly been studied as victims of the incumbent’s attacks. Indeed, many studies have examined how autocratizing ruling elites evade accountability (Gehlbach & Sonin, 2014; Trantidis, 2022) and perform media capture (Choi & Yang, 2021; Coşkun, 2020; Schiffrin, 2018). These attacks have demonstrably affected journalistic practices, leading many journalists to cave in to political pressures in numerous countries, including India (Chadha, 2025), Brazil (Ferreira, 2024a), and Israel Panievsky, 2022).

However, bottom-up journalistic resistance has mounted, although it has remained thus far on the fringes of academic research (Benazzo, 2024; Mesquita & de-Lima-Santos, 2023; Paskhalis, Rosenfeld, & Tertytchnaya, 2022; Urbániková, 2021). Moreover, the few works dedicated to the topic (Kurambayev, Myssayeva, & Freedman, 2024; Pleines & Somfalvy, 2022; Urbániková, 2021) have been single-case studies, with a lack of publications where journalistic resistance has been addressed comparatively.

To help fill in this gap, this article draws a comparison of journalistic resistance to autocratization in Poland and Slovakia, two EU countries that have followed opposite political trajectories in recent times (Haughton, Pomorska, Malová, & Deegan-Krause, 2024). Comparing journalistic resistance in two EU countries belonging to the same region—Central-Eastern Europe—is also instrumental to better understand the extent to which countries that are usually allotted under a similar journalistic culture may differ.

Indeed, most comparative research in journalism studies is still mainly focused on Western liberal democracies (Hanusch & Vos, 2020). In addition, typologies of different media systems as developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004, 2012) have formed a backdrop for much of the comparative work about the interplay between (Western) media and politics, but many of the comparative perspectives based on similar models have investigated macrolevel structures.

Furthermore, where analyses were performed at the meso- (media outlet) and micro- levels (individual journalists), the focus was on journalistic role conceptions. Only very recently have scholars started to address these practices, even if mainly in transitional (i.e., democratizing) regimes (Márquez-Ramírez, 2023; Mellado & Van Dalen, 2017). Journalistic practices under autocratizing regimes are yet to be examined comparatively.

Research Question and Definitions

The study addresses the following research question:

RQ1: How have independent media and critical journalists reacted to the actions autocratizing governments in Poland and Slovakia have taken to limit media freedom?

Certainly, a media outlet can be relatively independent of any government pressure, but be strongly influenced by the commercial interests of its owners and by indirect pressures from advertisers, donors, readers, or subscribers (Benson, 2019; Wright, Scott, & Bunce, 2019). Absolute media independence is unlikely to exist.

The definition of independent media used herein draws, therefore, on Barnehl and Schumacher (2024), who use “the terms independent or uncaptured *only with respect to the regime*” (p. 4; emphasis added). Within this research, the notion of independence is restricted to political independence, thus focusing on media that are neither heavily dependent on state resources (subsidies, advertisement) nor owned by government members or allied cronies.

The identification of critical journalists draws instead on the work of Repnikova (2017, 2018), who explains that critical journalism includes “investigative, in-depth, editorial and human-interest coverage of contentious societal issues” (2017, pp. 3–4). The author underlines that “what unites these journalists is their pursuit of social justice and their quest to push the envelope of permissible reporting” (Repnikova, 2017, p. 4). Hence, in the present study, reporters who cover contentious issues and challenge the government’s version are categorized as critical journalists.

Conceptualizing the onset of autocratization as a novel phenomenon, the theoretical framework of “journalistic innovation” (D’Haenens, Lo, & Moore, 2022) is employed to examine practices of journalistic resistance. Innovation is conceptualized herein as the ability to respond to changes by leveraging creative skills that enable the identification and resolution of a problem through the introduction of a new element that brings added value (Meier et al., 2024).

Building on the concept of resistance to autocratization (Tomini et al., 2022), “any activity, or combination of activities, taken by independent media or critical journalists who, regardless of the motivations, attempt at slowing down, stopping, or reverting the actions of the actors responsible for the process of autocratization” is considered a form of journalistic resistance to autocratization (p. 3).

Case Selection

Poland and Slovakia have followed two different political trajectories in recent times (Haughton et al., 2024).

Together with Hungary, Poland had become a textbook case of autocratization during the eight-year-long rule of the coalition led by Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, Law and Justice (PiS), as multiple V-Dem

reports observed. The 2023 report even listed the country among the 10 “major autocratizers” (Papada et al., 2023, p. 23). Polish autocratizers showed little restraint in their effort at curbing media freedom, leading Poland to fall from 18th place in 2015 to 66th place in 2023 on the World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RWB).

However, a liberal coalition won the parliamentary elections in October 2023, thus ousting the PiS and pledging to unravel the illiberal measures introduced by its predecessors. Therefore, the Polish media system constitutes an intriguing case study: Poland is the first EU country where a democratic government has come to power after a long phase of autocratization.

Priority has been given to restoring media freedom, especially through the “liberation” of public service media, or PSM (Kość, 2023). Taking aim at the propaganda machine established by the PiS, the new government introduced many new measures to restore media freedom in the country. The main initiative was the abrupt dissolution of the Polish PSM, which was meant to replace the leadership nominated by the former government that had been responsible for turning the Polish PSM into a PiS mouthpiece. This drastic move, however, was criticized by many observers, who claimed the new cabinet was missing the opportunity to create an actually independent PSM.

Slovakia, on the other hand, has had a series of weak governments between 2018 and 2023, which showed little interest in—or means of—attacking the press.

The state of press freedom has traditionally been considered satisfactory—17th position in the 2023 RSF Index—and Slovak civil society has also proven to be very effective. After the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová, in February 2018, the mass protests that erupted across the country forced autocratizing Prime Minister Robert Fico (SMER Party) to resign.

Fico, however, managed to stage a comeback five years later, plunging Slovakia into an autocratizing trajectory again (Priebus, 2024). As noted in the latest V-Dem report,

Slovakia has been showing a very rapid decline on the democracy index during the last two years. It reflects Prime Minister Fico’s attempts to consolidate power by undermining judicial independence, attacking civil society organization, and exerting political control over the media. (Nord, Angiolillo, Good God, & Lindberg, 2025, p. 45)

Immediately after taking office, the ruling coalition led by Fico launched a full-on attack on Slovak independent media and engaged in large-scale media capture.

Sample and Methodology

A total of 21 journalists were interviewed, 12 in Poland and nine in Slovakia. The main selection criterion was the relevance of the media potential interviewees represented. Through desk research on archives, editors in chief of all the main independent media in Poland and Slovakia were identified and

contacted.² Among these media were both established legacy media with a long history of resistance dating back to the communist period and its aftermath, such as *Gazeta Wyborcza* in Poland and *SME* in Slovakia, and fully digital media, such as *Onet* and *Aktuality.sk*.

Most of the sample was composed of editors in chief or deputy editors in chief: seven in Poland, six in Slovakia. When editors in chief were not available, ordinary journalists were invited.

Interviews with journalists were complemented by some targeted interviews with media experts (four in Poland and five in Slovakia), which integrated journalists' description of the practices of journalistic resistance with a wider perspective on the implications of autocratizers' moves on the national media systems. Table 1 in the Appendix lists the interviewees and the media or organization they represented at the time of the interview.³

For the two countries, the selection included both employees of media outlets directly attacked by the PiS government (*Oko.press*, *Onet.pl*, and *Rzeczpospolita*) and the Fico cabinet (*Aktuality.sk*, *SME*, *TV Markíza*, and *Denník N*), and representatives of media organizations that had not been directly attacked. This choice was made because both groups of media collaborated in some instances of resistance, as further detailed below.

On this note, it should be pointed out that the period during which the interviews were conducted (May–August 2024) was a particularly eventful and stressful one for Slovak journalists. The plans to take over the Slovak PSM (RTVS) and the overt threats against the owner of the main private television (TV Markíza) escalated after Prime Minister Fico survived an assassination attempt in May 2024. As Fico directly blamed the opposition and independent media for the shooting, the political climate rapidly worsened. Fico's return to office after his hospitalization, coupled with the conclusion of the term of President Zuzana Čaputová, a prominent civil rights advocate, and her replacement by Peter Pellegrini, leader of the *Hlas* Party and Fico's close ally, paved the way for significant actions aimed at curtailing media freedom, including the dissolution of RTVS and its replacement with STVR, a new entity entirely subordinated to the government's control (Chlebcová Hečková & Smith, 2025). Most of the Slovak interviewees were being directly affected by these ongoing developments at the time of the interview.

Once contact was established, the interviews were recorded on Teams. The video recordings were later transformed into MP3 files, transcribed using AI-powered Riverside software, and then manually checked to eliminate errors made by the software and perform preliminary screening. An inductive thematic analysis (Mortelmans, 2019) through NVivo 10 was then carried out.

² Among the independent media identified, seven Polish outlets and seven Slovak ones never replied or declined to participate in the research.

³ When directly asked about potential security risks, none of the interviewees identified any danger in taking part in the research. It was nonetheless agreed that, as a safety measure, interviewees would be anonymized, and quotes would not be attributed.

First, the content of the transcripts was inductively coded by assigning the data to three main metacategories: attacks on media freedom, countermeasures taken by journalists and the media (the research question), and a residual category called "contextual considerations," which grouped all the interviewees' elaborations on the consequences of attacks on media freedom in their national public sphere not directly linked to the research question.

As a strategy to increase reliability, the coding strategy followed a "constant comparison process" until no new themes were located to reach the theoretical saturation (Webb, 2017, p. 6), the major factor usually considered for assessing the validity of data collected through interviews (Mason, 2010).

Only the second metacategory, countermeasures taken by journalists and the media, was included in the analysis. The 127 references attributed to this meta-category were manually grouped under the 15 practices of journalistic resistance (Table 2 in the Appendix).

As a last step of the data analysis, the practices that research participants had identified as the most innovative were inductively regrouped under three main categories, which are illustrated in the next section.

Main Findings

Although a minority of the interviewees claimed the best form of resistance remained doing "more of the same" (e.g., producing more investigative journalism), three types of innovative practices clearly stood out.

Institutionalizing and Routinizing Structural Cooperation

In Slovakia, multiple forms of cooperation were standardized during the first months of the Fico administration. Some interviewees recounted that an automatism took root among editors in chief to denounce specific initiatives of the government targeting media freedom. As the editor in chief of a media not directly attacked explained,

We are trying to figure out what it means for us and to support our colleagues when they need it or when they reach out to us to sign some forms of statements [. . .] protecting the media or saying that we strive for the independence of Slovak media. (Participant 17)

Safe.Journalism.sk (Bezpečná.žurnalistika.sk in Slovak), a platform dedicated to monitoring attacks on Slovak journalists, was one of the major players behind such cooperation, which also helped to keep international attention high on the deterioration of media freedom in Slovakia.

As for Poland, in 2015, when PiS took office, the Polish independent media scene looked rather fragmented, with many of the private media used to seeing themselves as competitors. As media freedom gradually declined, though, many of them chose to join arms. According to several interviewees, an unprecedented wave of solidarity thus emerged between traditionally rival media. Large-scale protests were organized, such as Media Without Choice (*Media bez wyboru* in Polish): On February 10, 2021, a general

strike of independent media took place, with their websites, printed versions, and programs showing only a black page to protest a proposed tax on advertising that would have significantly diminished their revenues. Polish media also started to routinely cover attacks on their competitors. For instance, when the PiS government tried to push the so-called Lex TVN, aimed at “repolonizing” the Discovery-owned TVN, other media covered the story extensively. According to many interviewees, this institutionalization facilitated the involvement of external actors, primarily transnational media freedom NGOs and EU institutions.

Unionizing and Establishing Journalism Associations

In Poland, the increased solidarity recalled above led independent media to establish the Polish Media Council (PMC) in October 2023. While the PMC’s record has been mixed so far, and it currently excludes most pro-PiS media, it represents the first-ever forum for discussing common challenges, including those related to media’s dependency on very large online platforms (VLOPs). Journalists have also founded their own associations, such as the Association of Journalists and Authors of Public Radio (Stowarzyszenie Dziennikarzy i Autorów Radia Publicznego in Polish), which gathered many former employees at the Polish state radio who had resigned because of political pressures. One of the founding members recalled,

I was one of those persons who cared a lot about public media and who [were] not indifferent [to] what happened. And [. . .] with my friends, we created this association. At first, we were just 13 people there; now we are 23. (Participant 16)

Also according to most Slovak participants, the main example of journalistic resistance was precisely the establishment of a journalists’ union at TV Markíza. Unions had long been discredited in Slovakia, and the existing council for media services was largely perceived as ineffective. Therefore, TV Markíza employees’ choice came as a surprise to many. The newly established union decided to appoint Michal Kovačič, the outspoken critic of government interference, as its leader to make it harder for Markíza owners to fire him, as Slovak law prohibits the firing of union leaders. This decision sent a powerful sign of solidarity and enabled Kovačič to negotiate favorable conditions for his resignation.⁴

Launching Financially Independent Media and Journalistic Projects

One of the most effective forms of journalistic resistance in Poland was the foundation of new independent media and the launch of innovative journalistic projects that statutorily reject any form of public funding (ads, grants, and subsidies) and rely exclusively on subscription, donations, and external grants. Some were founded by journalists who had been either laid off or forced to resign by the new PiS-appointed board of PSM, such as Radio 357 and Raport o stanie świata.

It was mainly investigative journalism and fact-checking initiatives that flourished under PiS rule. As underlined by a Polish interviewee,

⁴ On May 14, 2025, Viktor Vincze, Kovačič’s successor at the helm of the union, was also fired by Michal Kratochvíl, TV Markíza’s newly appointed director of the News and Public Affairs Center (“Journalist Viktor Vincze,” 2025).

[The PiS period] was an absolutely great time for investigative journalists. [. . .] I had this impression that in the past years [investigative journalism] was dying in Poland and some newsrooms closed their investigative teams. But during the PiS time, it boomed. (Participant 1)

Fundacja Reporterów, a Polish NGO created in 2010 to support investigative journalism in Eastern Europe, launched two of the most successful projects: VSquare, a regional network of investigative outlets covering Central Europe, and Front Story, an investigative platform dedicated to Poland. Concerning fact checking, the foundation of Oko.press in 2016 was cited by many Polish interviewees as the best example of journalistic resistance that emerged in Poland over the last decade. The website Demagog, officially registered in 2016, was also very active in debunking far-right conspiracy theories.

In Slovakia, Denník N, an independent media heavily attacked by Fico and his allies, was established by former employees at Denník SME out of fear their editorial autonomy would have been threatened by a new owner, Penta, which purchased the daily during Fico's third term in 2014. Denník N has since become one of the most successful cases of reader-funded journalism in Europe (Hoiuk, 2024).

Discussion

Forms and Modes of Journalistic Resistance

As explained above, the majority of extant publications on journalistic resistance are single-case studies, which have mostly examined practices of resistance within the newsroom against attempts at enforcing a government-friendly editorial line, usually at PSM. Since the present study embraced a wider understanding of journalistic resistance, its findings are not fully comparable to those of previous research. They do, however, point to different trends.

While the employees of Voice of America studied by Wright, Scott, and Bunce (2024) and the journalists working for major Brazilian outlets interviewed by Ferreira (2024b) resorted to "hidden transcripts" and other indirect means for resisting political pressure, a sizable number of journalists and media in both Slovakia and Poland chose a more straightforward confrontation with autocratizing rulers.

A united coalition of Polish independent media organized mass demonstrations to protest some of the most repressive legal proposals by PiS. Slovak journalists did not hesitate to sign open letters, form unions, and go public on social media about the pressures they were facing. Michal Kovačič's strong televised appeal to resist the "Orbanization" of Slovak television on the last broadcast of his popular program *Na Telo* in May 2024 ("Slovakia," 2024) and the choice of radio journalist Dorota Nygren to bring her former employer, the Polish National Radio, to court for violation of the principle of equal treatment ("Poland," 2019) were exemplary in this regard.

These behaviors can be explained by the fact that, different from their colleagues in hybrid regimes (Voltmer, Selvik, & Høigilt, 2021) or authoritarian countries (Repnikova, 2017, 2018), journalists in Poland and Slovakia had experienced a relatively high degree of freedom after the end of the Cold War. They had

gotten used to seeing themselves as watchdogs of those in power (Metyková & Waschková Císařová, 2009). This partially explains why, when the situation of media freedom deteriorated, they immediately perceived that as a clear setback and reacted swiftly.

Indeed, although both private media and PSM in Central-Eastern Europe had always struggled to maintain their full independence (Jakubowicz, 2001; Štětka, 2012; Štětka & Örnebring, 2013), PiS's arrival to power marked the beginning of a more intense campaign of politicization. As a veteran of Polish journalism summarized,

There has always been the pressure on journalists in the public media to follow the government line, there have always been people who were parachuted in as management, to the management and to the programs. [. . .] But the level of this pressure and the level of this influence during the PiS era was incompatible to what had been before that. [. . .] The level of this pressure during PiS became absurd [. . .] There simply wasn't any place for the criticism of the government in the public media. (Participant 19)

The intensification of the attacks on media independence was also visible in Slovakia. While Urbániková (2021) speaks of "perceived political interference" and "creeping political pressures" on the editorial line of RTVS from Fico's government in 2017–2018, describing a gradual process of politicization that "culminated in layoffs and resignations of more than 30 reporters and editors in 2018" (p. 93), the new Fico cabinet dissolved RTVS altogether less than eight months after being sworn in.

Journalistic Innovations in Polarized Societies

Most Polish and Slovak interviewees shared different interpretations of the autocratization process that had occurred in their country. Whereas most Polish participants perceived the electoral victory of PiS in 2015 and its defeat in 2023 as "critical junctures" (i.e., moments of rupture and change), their Slovak counterparts placed Fico's comeback in 2023 in continuity with the recent history of the country. They interpreted Fico's return to power as the beginning of a harsher phase of confrontation, but most of them saw that as an exacerbation of the structural dysfunctions that had long plagued the Slovak media system. They could then resort to an updated repertoire of tools for resistance that, in some cases, dated back to the rule of autocrat Vladimír Mečiar in the 1990s.

Nevertheless, it is worth observing that in both countries the main innovations implemented, namely institutionalizing and routinizing structural cooperation along with unionizing and establishing journalism associations, represent relatively new phenomena.

After the fall of communism, Polish journalists' trade unions failed to attract substantial support, especially among younger professionals (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2016). Similarly, Gennard (2007) notes in his comparison of "print unions" in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary that "the working membership of SOZPP (Slovakia) fell by 95 percent" between 1990 and 2004, and while "in 1990, in all three countries, union density in the printing industry exceeded 90 percent by 2004, it had fallen to [. . .] 10 percent in

Slovakia" (p. 95). Therefore, cooperation and unionization amount to a novel mode of journalistic resistance in the region.

The increase of institutional collaboration, however, is linked to what Klimkiewicz (2021) labels "the structural polarization" of the news media environment in Poland. Noting that "the institutional setup of journalistic associations contributes to deeper fractioning of a journalistic community into opposing camps, applying different codes of conduct and self-regulatory measures" (Klimkiewicz, 2021, p. 69), the author identifies a growing cleavage between the illiberal and liberal camps of the Polish public sphere.

In this context, then, a deeper integration of media within the liberal camp can paradoxically serve autocratizers' purpose of entrenching their consensus within what Štětka and Mihelj (2024) label the "illiberal public sphere," namely "a communicative space comprising both traditional and new media that promote and amplify illiberal actors, views, and attitudes" (p. 3). This concept is consistent with the theorization of autocratization described above, as the illiberal public sphere "operates within the framework of a *political system that is not (yet) fully authoritarian*" (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024, p. 3; emphasis added)—i.e., an autocratizing political system. As recent studies suggest that opposition strategies to improve a country's resilience to autocratizing pressures are most effective when they succeed in depolarizing society (Somer, McCoy, & Luke, 2021), a closer cooperation between independent media could therefore fuel autocratization in the long term.

Overall, the findings show that in a phase where most legacy media are struggling to stay in business, independent media in autocratizing countries find themselves in a dilemmatic situation. Not only do subscriptions, the most craved option for strengthening financial independence, seem to have limited potential, as less than 15% of Polish and Slovak digital users are willing to pay for online content (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Arguedas, & Nielsen, 2024), but relying on subscriptions may also inadvertently consolidate the borders of that very illiberal public sphere where autocratizers cultivate their support.

In this regard, the role of PSM and large private networks can hardly be replaced by fully digital projects. As a Slovak expert pointed out,

Having your own podcast [. . .] is [an] option for the journalists. It's not an option for the country because we don't need one more podcast. We need quality journalism that will be widely available. And you will never have the same reach with one podcast as you would have with evening news of TV Markíza. (Participant 27)

Shifting Institutional Boundaries in a Hybrid Media Environment

Comparing Poland and Slovakia also enabled the identification of a specific phenomenon that has only appeared in the latter: the institutionalization of figures from the illiberal public sphere.

The convergence between "alternative media" spreading conspiracy theories and the far right is not a recent phenomenon (Archer, Schmitt, McGregor, & Jang, 2024; Sawyer, 2022). Moreover, some

populist right-wing administrations in liberal democracies have at times embraced conspiracy theories while questioning factual objectivity (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Gaughan, 2016).

The Fico cabinet appears, though, to have escalated this trend. Slovak interviewees reported that many self-styled journalists who lacked any former journalistic experience and had previously operated conspiracy-spreading YouTube channels, websites, and social media pages were hired as consultants and spokespeople by senior Slovak officials.

The most prominent example of this institutionalization of the illiberal media sphere was the appointment of Martina Šimkovičová as the minister of culture. A former journalist at Markíza and a centrist party MP, Šimkovičová gained prominence in the far-right media ecosystem through her collaboration with the conspiratorial online channel TV Slovan. In her role as minister of culture, Šimkovičová masterminded the dismantling of RTVS.

Faced with this overt attack on their societal role, Slovak professional journalists have engaged in an “institutional boundary work” (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Ihlebæk & Figenschou, 2022; Pedersen, Ihlebæk, Figenschou, & Mayerhöffer, 2024), marking a sharp distinction between their practices and those of these figures. One Slovak editor in chief noted,

Our government tr[ies] to create their own media environment. I mean that they support conspiracy influencers or alternative media which arose during the COVID pandemic and spread disinformation and conspiracy about vaccination or about the pandemic. And a lot of people start to receive information from this media. And now our government actively works with this new alternative media scene because these journalists are not critical to the government [. . .] The government politicians give them interviews, they support them. [. . .] So this is really, really strange. (Participant 25)

Such bold moves may signal a significant escalation in the autocratizers’ efforts to consolidate an illiberal public sphere.

Conclusion

This exploratory study has investigated the phenomenon of journalistic resistance in Poland and Slovakia, two EU countries whose political trajectories have recently followed opposite directions.

The two main impactful differences concern the pace and modes of governments’ attacks on media freedom. First, whereas in Poland, the autocratizing government gradually took over the PSM through a piecemeal approach over the course of its two terms in office, in Slovakia, it took less than a year for the government to dissolve the Slovak PSM and replace it with a new entity under its direct control. Second, members of the Polish government and their affiliates very frequently resorted to strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) against critical media (The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation, 2024), whereas this phenomenon was barely mentioned by the Slovak interviewees.

Two major limitations of the present study are worth pointing out. First are the different durations of the autocratization process in Poland and Slovakia, as well as their consequences. During its eight years in office, the PiS government has had the opportunity to reform the PSM in depth and considerably weaken privately owned independent media. The long-term impact of these actions on the Polish media system has been considerable, as demonstrated by the recent success of the far-right TV channel TV Republika. After PiS's electoral defeat, the far-right channel attracted viewers accustomed to the nationalist propaganda broadcast by the Polish PSM under PiS control. In parallel, the long period of PiS rule gave the independent media enough time to intensify and adapt their practices, moving from sporadic initiatives to more systematic processes.

Conversely, when the interviews were conducted, Robert Fico had only been in power in Slovakia for six to eight months. This shorter period meant that many phenomena observable in the Polish context, such as the creation of new media, had not yet fully materialized in Slovakia.

The second limitation of the present work concerns the study's methodology and sample. Because the aim was to gather first-hand data on the experiences of journalists and media outlets that had to deal with autocratization, the chosen methodology was interviews. The author is, however, aware that the data collected through interviews are invariably influenced by what Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) call "narrated role performances," namely "subjective perceptions and reflections on the roles journalists perform in practice [. . .] a kind of rationalized discourse distinct from the occasional use of narrative as a form of talking about or describing action" (p. 127). Therefore, the empirical material contains not only what independent media, and critical journalists have done to resist autocratization but also *what they think should be done* according to their professional standards.

Finally, since the topic of journalistic resistance will arguably remain relevant in the next few years, two potential avenues for future research can be identified. A first line of inquiry is the growing Europeanization of both autocratization and journalistic resistance. Most of the interviewees referred to Hungarian autocratizer Viktor Orbán as an inspiring figure for the provisions that like-minded ruling coalitions had introduced in their country. Orbán's authoritarian playbook, applied and refined over 15 years in power in Hungary, offers a blueprint for implementing "authoritarian practices" (Glasius, 2018) elsewhere. Hungary, indeed, operates as an "authoritarian gravity center" (Kneuer & Demmelhuber, 2020), spreading these practices across both the neighborhood and the whole of the EU.

Interestingly, such a standardization of authoritarian practices also influences journalistic resistance. There are signs of increasing cooperation both between media belonging to different countries and between media and transnational actors, such as associations, NGOs, and EU institutions in forms of journalistic resistance. Some Polish and Slovak independent media contributed, for instance, to launching transnational journalistic projects, such as the investigative platform VSquare and a network of regional media led by Notes From Poland, which has produced the podcast series VoiCEE on issues related to media freedom, corruption, and the rule of law. Many interviewees also mentioned the critical assistance they received from transnational associations and NGOs, such as the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights and the Prague Civil Society Center, for both advocacy and legal support. By and large, transnational solidarity networks are consolidating. Overall, the data show the emergence of a trend of

Europeanization of journalistic resistance, a novel phenomenon that may intrigue scholars willing to explore new avenues of research.

A second promising stream of research is the study of journalistic resistance in phases of re-democratization, such as the one Poland is currently in after almost a decade of intense autocratization. Despite not being the focus of the analysis, the topic still came up in most of the interviews with Polish journalists and experts. As recalled above, the new Polish government led by Donald Tusk since December 2023 has committed to restoring the rule of law, but most interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with its handling of the Polish PSM, questioning the legality of the drastic measures implemented to remove PiS loyalists. Although journalists' access to official information has improved, and the pressure on independent media has diminished, the creation of a working PSM in Poland still appears to be a distant objective. This points to a critical question any former opposition faces after defeating autocratizers at the ballot box: Can liberal democracy be restored through undemocratic means?

Part of the answer to this fundamental question relies on the continued capacity of independent media to hold *any* power accountable and thereby contribute to the depolarization of a deeply fragmented and polarized society.

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Appendix

Table 1. Sample of Interviewees.

Country	Name	Representing	Category
Poland	Participant1	TVN24	TV
Poland	Participant 2	Prague Civil Society Center	NGO
Poland	Participant 3	Radio TOK FM	Radio
Poland	Participant 4	SWPS University	Academia
Poland	Participant 5	Rzeczpospolita	Newspaper
Poland	Participant 6	Fundacja Reporterów	Investigative outlet
Slovakia	Participant 7	ICJK	Investigative outlet
Slovakia	Participant 8	SME	Newspaper
Slovakia	Participant 9	Euractiv Slovakia	Newspaper
Slovakia	Participant 10	MEMO 98	NGO
Slovakia	Participant 11	Aktuality	Newspaper
Poland	Participant 12	Gazeta Wyborcza	Newspaper
Poland	Participant 13	Jagiellonian University	Academia
Poland	Participant 14	National Broadcasting Council	Regulatory body
Slovakia	Participant 15	MEMO 98	NGO
Poland	Participant 16	Polityka Insight	Newspaper
Slovakia	Participant 17	Forbes SK	Newspaper
Poland	Participant 18	Oko.press	Investigative outlet
Poland	Participant 19	Raport o stanie świata	Freelance
Poland	Participant 20	Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights	NGO
Poland	Participant 21	Radio 357	Radio
Slovakia	Participant 22	Denník N	Investigative outlet
Slovakia	Participant 23	Nadácia Zastavme Korupciu	NGO
Slovakia	Participant 24	Reporters Without Borders	NGO
Slovakia	Participant 25	SME	Newspaper
Slovakia	Participant 26	Aktuality	Newspaper
Slovakia	Participant 27	Masaryk University	Academia
Poland	Participant 28	Notes From Poland	Newspaper
Poland	Participant 29	Onet.pl	Newspaper
Slovakia	Participant 30	Radio Express	Radio

Table 2. Practices of Journalistic Resistance in Poland and Slovakia.

Metacategory	Practices of journalistic resistance
Countermeasures taken by journalists and the media (127 references)	1. Covering local politics
	2. Doing "good journalism" as usual
	3. Engaging in metajournalism
	4. Embracing polarization and pushing a "resistant" narrative
	5. Fact checking
	6. Founding new financially independent media
	7. Increasing security and support measures
	8. Initiating cross-border journalistic projects and collaborations
	9. Involving external actors
	10. Moderating online debates
	11. Monitoring attacks on journalists and media
	12. Producing more investigative journalism
	13. Cooperating with other media
	- Forming unions and journalistic associations
	- Going public and raising social awareness
	- Organizing or joining public protests and strikes
	- Signing open letters and issuing public statements
	14. Setting up community-building initiatives
	15. Strengthening media financial resilience