

The suspension of U.S. funding for the free press in Moldova has unleashed a new wave of hatred against journalists aimed at discrediting them in the public eye. The attacks are both online and on the ground. Exposure to them can lead to psychological overload and increased stress and anxiety for the targeted journalists. The effects are magnified because social networks facilitate a mob mentality, where large groups of users can unite against an individual or a newsroom.

In today's issue, we talk about the impact of recent attacks and how to deal with them.

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The attacks began with the publication of lists of money received from USAID and attributed to several Moldovan newsrooms. The amounts circulated referred to grants received over several years, but the sources that distributed the information interpreted them in a biased manner.

One of the most attacked newsrooms during this period was *Ziarul de Gardă*. "We were accused of being financed by a 'criminal organization'. It was unfair but also shocking to hear such messages, including from politicians who had previously received support from USAID and who thanked the American people for that support. The attacks continued even after *ZdG* made it clear where the money that supports the work of the newsroom comes from," says Victor Moșneag, editor-in-chief of *Ziarul de Gardă*.

The stigmatization of journalists in the context of the suspension of U.S. foreign funding has not been limited to the online space, but has also manifested itself on the ground. Măriuța Nistor, a reporter for *ZdG*, was intimidated by both Bashkan Evghenia Gutz and her supporters at a court hearing. The journalist was accused of receiving funding from a "criminal group," a reference to USAID. At another demonstration, *ZdG* journalists were hit and verbally abused by participants, again accused of being "financed by a criminal group," a narrative widely used to undermine the credibility of the independent press. "I think we were the most criticized newsroom, **but we continued to do the right work and explain to readers and the community the issues that we felt were relevant.** It was easy for us because we have had nothing to hide. All [our annual reports](#), including our funding, are public, and when everything is out in the open, you have nothing to worry about," *ZdG*'s editor-in-chief says.

In its 20 years of activity, the *ZdG* newsroom has been attacked many times. **Each time it has publicly denounced the attacks**, even if the perpetrators have not been brought to justice. "Silence is not a solution, people of good faith need to know about it, the attackers need to be in the sights of the public and law enforcement, and journalists need to be safer that way."

At *ZdG*, the newsroom always discusses what has happened and what can be done. **"The basic principle is not to let the attacked colleague feel alone in the face of the attackers.** If necessary, we discuss with lawyers, authorities and media NGOs." Victor Moșneag says this support is important because situations like this can demotivate some journalists. "This is also one of the goals of those who attack independent journalism, to make journalists give up."

The newsroom has received hundreds of messages of support from readers and, with the help of other organizations, is gradually filling the gap left by the suspension of US funding. "Colleagues who have been here for a long time, but also new colleagues, already know what *Ziarul de Gardă* is about, they know that we are a fair media outlet, that we do our job with dignity and that we will not spare anyone when we have evidence. **And they also know that they will sometimes be attacked or criticized, but also praised and supported tenfold by our community**, and that gives us the courage and the confidence to continue to do our job."

For other newsrooms facing similar situations, Victor suggests they respond calmly and transparently, **asking the authorities to intervene to protect their journalists and their reputations.** "The *ZdG* newsroom has always been transparent about the real situation, and when journalists have been attacked, we have raised the issues with media and law enforcement organizations. For example, in the case of the physical attack on our colleagues Măriuța Nistor and Igor Ionescu, a complaint was filed with the police. I believe that we must act to put an end to all physical attacks on journalists from the outset, so as to leave no room for interpretation and not to allow things to escalate in the future," the *ZdG* editor-in-chief stresses.

Victor Moșneag also says that the source of these hostilities is undoubtedly Russian propaganda, to which some Moldovan citizens and politicians have fallen prey. To those commentators who say that the media cannot be truly independent because they are supported by outside sources, we should explain that **Western-funded media operate without any direction from anyone.** "The only condition the funders put on you is to do quality, fair journalism, which means to use all possible sources in a story and to be fair. Some funders offer grants to write about specific issues, such as corruption, human rights or justice, but these are in no way an attack on the independence of the press. Ideally, of course, the press should be self-financing through subscriptions, sales and donations from the people, because, as we know, journalism is in the public interest. But unfortunately, in Moldova, the moment when citizens can pay for the press is still far away, and grants are the only option for independent journalism. I believe that **all independent, grant-funded newsrooms are open to receive skeptics to show them how decisions are made in these newsrooms**, who influences, how topics are chosen and how independent they are."



Ruslan Rotaru
psychologist-
psychotherapist with
katathym-imaginative
orientation

What newsrooms can do to reduce the negative impact of public attacks on journalists

What effect can public hate speech have on a person?

Public hate speech can lead to intense emotional responses such as fear, anger, sadness, and shame. **People may also feel that their sense of self is under attack**, which can affect performance and self-esteem. People may feel disliked, judged, or rejected. In addition, public hate speech can lead to a form of collective burnout of the targeted community, in this case the journalism profession. Over time, constant exposure to negative comments can trigger the body's stress response, leading to chronic stress and anxiety. Individuals may become hypervigilant, constantly alert to potential threats, which can make it difficult to relax. **The effects can also spill over into work performance**, as chronic stress affects cognitive functions such as attention, memory and decision-making, leading to reduced productivity and difficulty concentrating on tasks.

How does social media amplify that impact?

Social networks allow hate speech to reach a global audience almost instantaneously, and this content can go viral in minutes and often remain online indefinitely, meaning that the target can be exposed to it again and again. **The anonymity provided by social networking sites encourages people to express hateful opinions** that they would not share face-to-face. In addition, the 24/7 nature of social media means that this content can reach people at any time, making it difficult to disconnect and recover. Social networks also facilitate mob mentality, where large groups of users unite against one person. **The anonymity provided by social networking sites encourages people to express hateful opinions** that they would not share face-to-face. In addition, the **24/7 nature of social media** means that this content can reach people at any time, making it difficult to disconnect and recover. Social networks also facilitate mob mentality, where large groups of users unite against one person.

How to manage the impact of such attacks?

Both immediate and long-term psychological, emotional and practical measures are recommended. Here are some examples:

- **Mindfulness** practices such as **meditation and deep breathing exercises** can help people manage stress and stay grounded in the present moment;
- Blocking harassers on social networks and **reporting abusive content** can help mitigate the effects of online bullying. While reporting tools are not always effective, they can provide a sense of control and reduce the frequency of harassment;
- **Taking breaks from social media** or limiting screen time can help reduce the emotional impact of constant exposure to negative content;
- Connecting with friends, family or support groups. **Connecting with other journalists** who understand the unique challenges of the profession can provide emotional support and practical advice. Mutual support reduces feelings of isolation and stress;
- In cases of severe harassment, **legal action** can be an effective way to hold offenders accountable. This may include filing a police report or a civil lawsuit;
- Regular exercise, adequate sleep, and a balanced diet are essential to maintaining physical and mental resilience;
- **Seeking help from a therapist** or counselor who specializes in trauma or work-related stress can provide journalists with tools to cope with harassment and its psychological effects.

How to detach oneself from public criticism?

- Practicing self-compassion – **treating oneself with kindness** and understanding during difficult times – can help people detach from harsh criticism and maintain their self-esteem.
- Learning to separate one's own worth from external opinions is essential to detachment from public criticism. This means recognizing that **many critical comments often reflect the critic's biases or insecurities** rather than one's own worth.
- We need to **distinguish between constructive criticism and unproductive negativity**. This can help us focus on feedback that is useful for development and ignore harmful comments.
- **Surrounding yourself with supportive colleagues** and mentors can create a "buffer effect" against public criticism and keep you focused on your work.

What can media managers do to support journalists in such situations?

Media organizations should publicly advocate for the rights and safety of journalists, including by campaigning for stronger legal protections against harassment and hate speech. It is important to communicate in the public space that attacks will not be tolerated and that journalists are human beings who deserve respect. Humanizing journalists can be done by sharing their personal stories, behind-the-scenes content, interviews or social media posts that show the person behind the scenes. It is also necessary to highlight the positive impact of journalists' work – such as exposing corruption, giving voice to the marginalized and holding those in power accountable – to remind the public of the value of journalism. Regular recognition of journalists' hard work and achievements is very important. It can boost morale and create a positive working environment.

In addition, newsrooms should have clear, written policies that define harassment, outline reporting mechanisms and spell out consequences for perpetrators. These policies should be communicated to all employees and applied consistently.

Managers should also meet regularly with journalists to discuss their well-being, workload and challenges, and **encourage journalists to take regular breaks, use vacation time** and disconnect from work outside of working hours.



Opportunity!

Media outlets in Moldova can receive grants of up to €15,000 to develop their organization in several areas, including physical and digital security capabilities. Click [here](#) for details.



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