



Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [The FCO and global media freedom, HC 1920](#)

Tuesday 11 June 2019

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Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Chris Bryant; Stephen Gethins; Ian Murray; Royston Smith; Catherine West.

Questions 94-123

Witnesses

I: Rana Rahimpour, Senior Presenter, BBC Persia, Jessikka Aro, Reporter, Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yle), and Beata Balogová, Editor-in-Chief, SME Newspaper, Slovakia.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Beata Balogová](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rana Rahimpour, Jessikka Aro, and Beata Balogová.

Q94 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Thank you very much, all three of you, for coming. I am extremely grateful. Can we start with a very brief introduction? Jessikka, would you like to start?

Jessikka Aro: My name is Jessikka Aro. I am an investigative journalist with the Finnish Broadcasting Company. I specialise in Russia, information warfare and extremism.

Beata Balogová: I am Beata Balogová. I am editor-in-chief of the daily *SME*, which is a major Slovak newspaper. I am also vice-chair of the International Press Institute.

Rana Rahimpour: I am Rana Rahimpour. I am one of the journalists working for the BBC Persian service, which is part of the World Service. We broadcast in Persian for Farsi speakers all over the world, but prominently in Iran.

Q95 **Stephen Gethins:** Thank you all for coming along today. I would like to talk about your personal experiences in a moment, but before we do that, I wonder whether in general terms each of you can set out what you think are the threats to media freedom in the world today, how they are changing and whether they are getting worse. I am happy for anybody to start.

Jessikka Aro: From my point of view, coming from Russia investigations for many years, as well investigations into the spreading of jihadist social media propaganda, I would definitely say that Russia's, or the Kremlin's, information warfare is targeted first and foremost at Russian critical and independent journalists but also extended to international thinkers, journalists, writers and citizen activists. It is not just journalists. Then, of course, there is the far right hate agitation, which is ongoing internationally, also in the United States in the near surroundings of President Donald Trump.

Beata Balogová: Especially in the Visegrád region, that is, central and eastern Europe, 30 years after the fall of communism, the communist understanding of journalism is coming back. There are efforts to redefine journalism. Politicians are trying to suggest to the public that the role of a journalist is just to inform. They are denying the watchdog role of journalism.

That is combined with more aggressive rhetoric towards journalists. When you see that with public officials, it legitimises aggression and encourages verbal attacks at journalists. Also, ownership has changed. In the region I come from, oligarchs are involved in massive shopping of independent media and they are not the most responsible media owners.



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They are buying media either to balance power or to make sure that their public image is getting polished, or that they can put pressure on legislative proceedings. Of course, I completely agree that Russian hybrid warfare is also a very serious issue in my region.

Rana Rahimpour: We all agree that it is getting worse. Speaking about Iran, there has been about a decade of arbitrary arrest of family members back in Iran. Obviously, we are not in Iran; we have to broadcast from elsewhere because we are not allowed to work there. There is confiscation of passports and travel bans.

At the moment, there is a criminal investigation into 152 current and former members of the Persian service. As a result, they have put an asset freeze on all those people who are on the list. There are attacks online, especially on female journalists working for the Persian service, with the hope that they will discredit female journalists, especially because the majority of our audience are very religious. They try to say, "These women are indecent and you should not listen to what they are reporting." So overall it is getting worse.

Q96 **Stephen Gethins:** Thank you for that general overview. For the record, could you each now talk about your own personal experiences, to give us something concrete? I am happy with anybody, but Jessikka, do you want to start again?

Jessikka Aro: My problems and the crimes that have been targeted at me started in 2014. I started to investigate the venue for Russian information warfare, the social media troll factory, and specifically its impact on real people. I started a crowdsourced investigation. I investigated and exposed their activities.

I also travelled to St Petersburg early in 2015. Already, in September 2014, I was the target of Russian fake news. I was being smeared and labelled as not being a journalist at all. Instead, I was labelled as a NATO assistant, as a helper of Baltic/American special services. I was said to be committing crimes.

My contact information was published. I learned why digital information is so horribly dangerous, with threats, not just to individual journalists' security but to the national security of many countries. People believed those lies and were agitated into hatred and started calling me from all around the Russian-speaking world. People believe this stuff.

That was only the beginning. After that, I became the target of literally hundreds of different fake news stories that smeared me, describing me as a NATO agent, mentally ill, a drug-user and a drug-dealer. They spread memes, they claimed that I had written my "awarded" troll articles under the influence of drugs and that I had brain damage, and they stalk almost every public event that I attend and make demeaning comments. This is the fifth year of the hate agitation. They mobilise real Finnish readers of their stories to hate me and send me death threats. Even my own former friends have read this stuff and believed it and sent me death threats.



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Even people who know me personally are apt to change their opinion after reading only one fake news story about me. This is really influencing and brainwashing people.

The Finnish police tell me that I face the threat of impulsive violence in Finland if I am in the wrong place at the wrong time. I have been living abroad to get away from all this. I have taken some of the perpetrators to court and they were convicted in a massive case of stalking, aggravated slander and assisting aggravated slander, along with other crimes. *The New York Times* referred to it as the first case in which a European country is taking Russian-connected disinformation spreaders to court. The verdict is now being appealed in the appeals court, but the sad news is that the verdict has not stopped the suspected crimes against me.

Q97 Chair: Has it made any difference?

Jessikka Aro: No. It only made things worse. I will give you one more detail. Before the trial last summer, they agitated people through YouTube to participate in the trial, to harass journalists, to confront me, to film me and to write everything I say on social media. I received more and more threats because of that. The courtroom was half full of extremist, agitated angry people who already hated me, with only half left for journalists. This is information warfare in real life.

Q98 Stephen Gethins: You said you had some assistance from the Finnish police. Have you had any assistance from social media platforms through this process?

Jessikka Aro: No, they are very negligent. I wrote a report in 2016 in which I tried to get them to see their responsibility. This was before the US elections, which back then were already being heavily trolled. I tried to warn people in the US about this. I also mentioned the responsibility of social media platforms, because they are the enablers of Russian trolls and other state-sponsored propaganda. They even profit from some of these operations.

As multinational companies, they should protect their users, but at the moment they are not protecting us. They do not give us a warning sign, or our children who are using this platform and reading Russian troll news, hate speech, racism and all this. They do not give a warning message: explicit content—beware! Not even us adults; I have been in contact with different social media platforms. I was recently in Silicon Valley where I met with other disinformation survivors. I met the executives of these companies and demanded change, but they had already been warned internally—for example, about the Russian trolls, long before the US elections got completely trolled—but they did not do anything. They need to be regulated. Please, can you regulate them?

Stephen Gethins: Thank you.

Q99 Chris Bryant: We are talking about Yevgeny Prigozhin and his trolling outfit in St Petersburg, yes?

Jessikka Aro: Yeah.



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Q100 **Chris Bryant:** Some of his influence has been in the nearer territory to Russia, but there is now evidence that it is extending elsewhere, in Africa for example. Is that your understanding?

Jessikka Aro: In Sudan, I recently read news about Yevgeny Prigozhin agitating or organising an attempt to help the then dictator of Sudan to spread fake information about the protests against the dictator, and also to organise slaughterings of the protestors publicly.

Chris Bryant: And in Madagascar as well, I gather.

Jessikka Aro: There too? Okay.

Chris Bryant: Yes. It is a series of countries now, I think, in Africa where the pattern is exactly the same as the one that you have seen.

Jessikka Aro: It is disinformation on social media. It is limitless.

Q101 **Stephen Gethins:** I would like to give the other witnesses the opportunity to speak and to explore some of these themes more closely.

Beata Balogová: For me, the most serious experience came after the murder of our colleague Ján Kuciak. He was killed last year. Before he was murdered, he turned to the police, because he had received threats from the concrete person who ordered his murder. The police downplayed the complaint and said that those were only verbal attacks and they did not consider them serious enough.

During the course of the murder investigation, we learned that an organised group had surveilled several investigative journalists for the course of a year. This organised group is a criminal group around Marián Kočner, who ordered the murder of the journalist. They had access to police databases. They had connections to the prosecutor's office. They even used a social worker who came to a female journalist with small children to inquire whether she was taking good care of the children, but he collected information for the guy who ordered the murder of the journalist.

We are a little concerned about whether all this will be properly investigated, because the investigators themselves might not understand how serious the situation is when, in a democratic country, there is an organised group to surveil journalists. They actively use the word "paparazzing"; they say that they were collecting discrediting information about the journalist, that the journalists have to carry the same kind of scrutiny as public officials, and that it was okay for them to take pictures of the journalists in public places. We actually learned that they regularly came and tapped phone calls in a bar where journalists gathered after finishing work at the office. It showed how state bodies could be misused for monitoring journalistic work.

We also learned during the course of the investigation that, when journalists turned to the police when they were threatened, either by Marián Kočner, who ordered the murder, or by some other mafia people,



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the police were not really trained enough to deal with these complaints. For example, a colleague, whose name I prefer not to say, turned to the police because he also had threats from Marián Kočner, and the police investigated those threats by asking questions that pertained to his private life. He was asked whether he was abused by his father and whether he abused drugs. The police were trying to investigate whether the statements were true, and not the fact that he was intimidated by these questions by this businessman.

It shows that, often, when journalists—I spoke to several investigative journalists in Slovakia—turn to the police, the police are almost helpless. They ask, “Do you feel threatened?” and we tell them, “Well, it is your job to tell me whether I am under threat and whether I should pursue a criminal complaint.” In several countries, especially Slovakia and also in Hungary, because these things are not taken seriously enough, the police are not trained well to deal with these issues.

Q102 Stephen Gethins: Do you think that this is an issue of a lack of training, rather than not having the right legal processes, or is it something more sinister?

Beata Balogová: I think it is a combination of both, and it is also the lack of understanding of the job of a journalist. I think the police genuinely believe that it is part of our job to be attacked, cursed at and verbally abused. It is a challenge for us to explain to our colleagues that it is also the job of the state to protect us, and it is not part of our job, as Jessikka said, just to take any kind of verbal attack—and, going back to where I started, the murder of Ján Kuciak showed that that is not the worst thing that can happen to you.

The Prime Minister, the former Prime Minister and several other politicians brought a lot of aggression to the public space. Because they verbally attack journalists, they legitimise that kind of hate speech against journalists. For example, the former Prime Minister of my country, Robert Fico, routinely called journalists dirty Slovak prostitutes and slimy snakes, and that made it legitimate to talk about journalists in that way. After the murder of Ján, we realised that the Prime Minister of your country calling you by not very decent names is not the worst thing that can happen to you. For example, the former Prime Minister once called a press conference at which he openly accused me of defaming the country because I gave an interview to an Austrian daily in which I criticised the spread of corruption in the country. Basically, he used taxpayers’ money and an official forum—a press conference—to attack a journalist.

This is very specific to the region. We know that autocrats inspire each other, but Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian Prime Minister, was an immense inspiration for several politicians in the region with autocratic tendencies, because they feel encouraged; they feel that, if Viktor Orbán can get away with those attacks on the press and with suffocating the free press, they can do the same.

Q103 Chair: Jessikka’s example is of Russian interference in an EU state. Your



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example is different; it is leaders of EU states attacking a free press. Do you think that this problem is getting more serious? Do you think that it is inspired by people outside the EU? Do you think it is home-grown? How do you see it?

Beata Balogová: I think it is a general trend, and the spread of populism and forces of the extreme right getting into mainstream politics is behind that trend. Not only in Slovakia but in many other countries, public figures legitimise hate speech against journalists; they call them enemies of the nation, and say that they are being paid as foreign agents and are foreign forces. In that way, they hope to weaken their criticism and their scrutiny. They feel that, if they tell the public that we attack the state by criticising them or calling them corrupt, that is the way to protect themselves, but they undermine democratic institutions, because then they send masses of people to read the press that Jessikka was describing.

In Slovakia, the whole segment of fake news and the conspiracy media is growing. We have public officials who are giving interviews to these Russian-financed media because these papers or websites do not criticise them. This is a very dangerous tendency. Public officials, in order to weaken criticism of their corruption, attack independent media, instead choosing fake and conspiracy media as their channels of communication.

Q104 **Chair:** The description you have just given is really a description of an attack on democracy, and of the media failing in its essential duty of being one of the checks on democracy. Do you think that this is the deliberate policy of a foreign Government to undermine the democratic institutions in Slovakia, or do you think that this is home-grown?

Beata Balogová: Again, it is a combination. The Russian threat that Jessikka described is real, but corrupt public officials, short-sightedly, in order to stay in power, attack free media, and they don't realise that by doing so they undermine democratic institutions. If you look at Hungary and Viktor Orbán, you can see that he elevated fake news to a state doctrine, and he completely suffocated the free press. He didn't do that because of Russian support; he did it in order to keep power, and to prolong his rule in his country. It is a combination of the egotistical, short-sighted approach of politicians, who understand that by attacking the free media, they can weaken criticism and basically keep power, and of Russian activity in the region. That combination can be very serious.

Q105 **Chair:** What is the European Union doing, if anything, to help?

Beata Balogová: I will be critical now, because I think that early on the European Union should have said clearly that how Orbán treated the free press was unacceptable. I understand that it was a balance of geopolitical interests and principles, but what it did encouraged other leaders with autocratic tendencies to attack the free press, because they thought that if Hungary, an EU member, could do that without serious repercussions for geopolitical reasons, perhaps they too could avoid criticism.

Q106 **Catherine West:** In another EU country, Malta, where there were issues around the famous assassination of a journalist, the EU appointed a



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rapporteur specialist. Has anyone like that been appointed from the EU to deal with the sorts of problems that you are describing?

Beata Balogová: I do not think that any progress has been made in Malta, in the investigation of Daphne's killing. We are entering a stage when sending rapporteurs just doesn't work anymore. Unless the countries are cut off from EU funding, or see that undermining democratic institutions and the free press has a more serious consequence, I don't think that anything will change.

An important point for me is that EU institutions should stress that press freedom is not an internal state affair; it is a whole-Europe issue. Maybe the EU should stress more the line that a free press, and how a member state treats the press, is not just the business of a state. This may be only at the level of rhetoric, but it is an important issue.

Q107 **Stephen Gethins:** Will you give us your perspective, Ms Rahimpour?

Rana Rahimpour: I have come under attack at different levels. Not only am I on the list of the 152 people who are being investigated on charges of conspiracy against national security—there is an asset freeze on me—but my family has been targeted as well.

Q108 **Stephen Gethins:** This is by the Iranian authorities.

Rana Rahimpour: By the Iranian authorities. In 2013, my father was called in for interrogation by the Ministry of Intelligence. He was interrogated for several hours, and was told that he should ask me to stop working for the BBC. My father made it clear that that was not going to happen, because I have always been very stubborn and I wouldn't listen to him. They threatened that if I did not leave the BBC, they would cut his pension and confiscate his passport. They wanted my information, my address in London, my number and my husband's details. That interrogation ended.

A few months later, I had my first child. My father was about to board a flight to come and join us in London, and at the airport his passport was confiscated. My mother was already in London. She went back a few weeks later, and her passport was also confiscated upon her arrival in Tehran. Unfortunately, it turned out that they were under a travel ban. That lasted for about a year, during which time no one explained why my parents were being punished for something that I was doing in London.

Every day, they went to the Ministry of Intelligence and different courthouses just to meet someone and get an answer why. They finally got a meeting with a judge—Judge Moghiseh, a notorious judge who is famous for being involved in many political cases. When I heard his name, I was frozen, because I did not realise that what I was doing was so serious that he would be assigned the judge of my case. He had a meeting with my father and said, "As her father, it is your job to stop her." He jokingly said, "BBC Persian is a very good service. I watch it. I like it. She is actually a good reporter, but she has to stop working for the BBC." He said, "Just go away. Your travel ban is going to be in place for a year."



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Eventually, after a year, they managed to get their passports back, and they have been able to come and visit us, but it was a very difficult year.

I have also experienced online attacks. News agencies affiliated with the Revolutionary Guard have written articles about me, in which they said that I wasn't married to my husband.

Chair: I can witness that you are.

Rana Rahimpour: State television hacked into his Facebook account and took photos of a trip that he made to Iran before we met. They pretended that he had been travelling to Iran and was an economic spy working for the British Government. That was broadcast on state television. This was after President Rouhani was elected. My husband was thinking of paying a visit, but when that news came out we decided that it was not a good idea, and he cancelled that trip. In the same article in which they said that I wasn't married to my husband, there was a photo of our wedding. The reason for that was to show that we are indecent, westernised Iranians who are trying to infiltrate Iranian culture.

There are also daily attacks. Only yesterday, in a public post on Instagram, somebody said, "When we get our hands on you, we will make sure you are raped before we cut your head off." That is almost daily, and we have kind of got used to it. As I say, there are different levels.

My other colleagues have experienced multiple troubles. The most painful fact is that they have lost family members—mothers and fathers—and haven't been able to go back. In one case, a mother was diagnosed with cancer. Her health condition was so bad that she couldn't go to a third country. It is also very difficult to come to the UK, so sometimes we have to go to a third country to visit family members. She was so unwell that she couldn't go to Dubai, for instance, so my colleague could visit. She died in front of Skype. My colleague, who was the eldest son of the family—the mother was a single mum and raised her son on her own—was finished. He was not the same person after that experience. On an emotional level, in terms of family ties, it has been extremely difficult.

Many of my colleagues are under asset freezes. I do not have any assets in Iran, but for many of my colleagues who do, the asset freeze means that they have got into family feuds; if they inherit something from their parents and get a share of that asset, they cannot sell it, which means that their brothers and sisters cannot sell it. Under the economic pressure that Iran is experiencing, many of them are really desperate to get their hands on their inheritance, and they can't. That puts extra pressure on my colleagues to leave the Persian Service, and as a result many of them have. Some have reached the point where they feel, "This is not worth it; I can't cause trouble for extended family members." There are multiple layers of almost a decade of systematic harassment of me and my colleagues at the Persian Service.

Q109 **Chair:** For all three of you, your evidence today is public, as you know, and this session is broadcast live. This will presumably lead to reactions.



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What effect do you think giving testimony like this will have on you? All three of you are extremely courageously speaking out; what sort of reactions do you expect from—

Jessikka Aro: I already know; I can anticipate it really well. Since last November or December, there has been a very active disinformation campaign throughout the Finnish pro-Kremlin, pro-hate speech, fake news sphere, claiming that I work in co-operation with a western troll factory governed, directed and paid for by you guys, basically—the British Parliament and British foreign Ministry. They have repeated that lie so many times that even two proper, professional journalists have asked whether it is true.

I believe that this stream will be watched with great interest, and will be added on top of those libellous claims that I work in a western troll factory, and that you give me the topics and themes to write about for the Finnish Broadcasting Company, and pay me money.

Stephen Gethins: As a Member of the Scottish National party, for the record I am not a member of the British establishment. Sorry; I am making light of something that is incredibly serious and that we, as MPs, see on a regular basis. You illustrated that point very well.

Q110 **Chris Bryant:** Ms Balogová, you spoke earlier about oligarchs wanting to corrupt or influence the legislative process. Do you want to say a bit more about that?

Beata Balogová: I would not say it is influencing the legislative process directly. However, one oligarch from the financial group Penta once called buying media a “nuclear suitcase”, which means that they look at investing in the media as a type of pressure. It is very difficult to say which legislative process they want to influence directly, but they are buying media as a kind of protection. We have already seen that some media, such as those that Penta bought, are being used to defame their critics. They directly intervene in the content.

Here, the inspiration is coming from Babiš, the Czech Prime Minister, who, before getting into politics and gaining political influence, bought a lot of media, including traditional Czech critical media, which then turned into mouthpieces for Babiš. Through his example, oligarchy groups have come to understand that, by buying media, they can gain influence and also work on their public image. I am not under the illusion that they are getting into media because they want to promote a free press.

My newspaper has a minority owner who is an oligarch. Our only good luck is that the majority owner is a traditional newspaper owner. When the German newspaper owners were withdrawing from the region, they sold their share to this oligarch group. Since then, it has taken a lot of effort to keep my newspaper independent. Other newspapers that this oligarch group bought were not that lucky. They have gradually been losing independence. They have been using the newspaper for their own goals.

Q111 **Chris Bryant:** Can I slightly push back? In the UK, all of our newspapers,



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apart from *The Guardian*, are owned by oligarchs. They are not called oligarchs because they are not Russian, but they are oligarchs. They are exactly the same; they are very wealthy people, most of whom do not pay taxes in this country. They each have a political agenda, which they clearly pursue in support of one candidate or another, one party or another, or political policy. Several newspapers last year ran big headlines calling British politicians who had voted a particular way enemies of the people. Might there be a sense of hypocrisy here?

Beata Balogová: I understand your point. If the newspaper is not visibly politicised, it does not necessarily matter who owns the paper, because it trickles down to the integrity of journalists. But from the papers I mentioned, several critical journalists have left, because they considered it impossible to do independent journalism under such leadership. Based on their testimony, we understand that this particular oligarch group, or Babiš in the Czech Republic, were actively using their newspapers to push through their agenda. It means that journalists were doing self-censorship in order not to make the oligarch angry. They remained silent about certain topics.

To take a recent example, there were huge protests in the Czech Republic, and the EU massively criticised the Czech Prime Minister Babiš for abusing EU funding. All other Czech newspapers, on the day of massive protests, had headline stories about Babiš's conflict with the EU. His newspapers were completely silent about that. There it is visible that the paper is not making independent decisions and is influenced by the owner.

Q112 **Chris Bryant:** A lot of journalists have been killed in Russia since President Putin came to power. Anna Politkovskaya is probably the most famous of them, but she is only one of many. How important is that kind of real fear in determining whether people become journalists and whether they remain journalists and what kind of things they write?

Beata Balogová: I did not realise until after the day Ján was killed how important a question that would be, partly because we suddenly realised that we were not able to explain to the public why we were shouting more when a journalist was killed than when an old lady was killed for €20. Because the public ask why. People were thinking quite a lot about what happened. We were trying to explain that we had come to a crossroads, and that this is a very serious case.

There was unseen co-operation between different newsrooms. We stuck together and tried to finish the stories that Ján Kuciak was not able to finish. But I also had at least two colleagues who started having panic attacks and more stress. They had a difficult time digesting what happened and understanding that this could have happened to any of us, especially after we realised that there was this massive surveillance prior to the killing.

Q113 **Chris Bryant:** That was the next question I was going to ask all of you, really. Is surveillance a real aspect of what you can be subjected to? I don't just mean somebody watching your Facebook or Twitter feed or



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what you read but real surveillance of your life. Is that an aspect of your lives?

Beata Balogová: One year ago, I would have told you that I think it was paranoia—that it is a journalistic paranoia to turn off your mobile phone and take out the batteries. However, if Ján had not been murdered, we would have never learned that an organised criminal group was actively watching journalists, tracing how they went home, taking pictures of their families and children and recording who they met.

We are still thinking and digesting what it means. I think a lot of pressure should be put on the Slovak investigation authorities to investigate whether this was just a deviation or whether it is built into the system, because then it is a problem. I am ethnic Hungarian, so I often go to Budapest and talk to a lot of Hungarian colleagues, and they feel that they are surveilled as well, and that their criticism has a consequence in many ways.

Rana Rahimpour: The threat is definitely there. When they interrogated a colleague's mother, they said: "It is very easy for us to make sure that your son will accidentally get killed in a car crash in London. We have done this before, we can do it now." More recently, the Mizan news agency, which belongs to Iran's judiciary, wrote an article saying that the hidden hand of God will teach these traitors the result of what they are doing, which for many people who follow Iranian politics is a code for extrajudicial killings, so the threats are there.

As to whether Iran has the capability to do such things, recent stories that happened in the European Union that resulted in more sanctions on parts of Iran's intelligence ministry show that, yes, they were plotting attacks—not on members of the media but on other people in the European Union—so potentially the answer is yes. They have the capabilities and they have made threats. On whether I am personally aware of any surveillance, the answer is no.

Jessikka Aro: In my case there has been a lot of surveillance, mostly on social media but also through other means. On social media, you have to understand the Finnish legislation. Stalking on social media or social networks is just as punishable as physical stalking. In Finland, it is not okay to contact a person many times on social media or to find out information about him or her or to do any stupid stuff for too long on social media, or else it will become stalking.

In my case, the perpetrators basically crowdsourced the stalking. As well as crowdsourcing the harassment and the threats and sending ongoing libellous hate speech against me, they now have unknown people or activists who gather information about me, even on what kind of social media posts I like. If I happen to like some posts, such as if my friend posts about NATO or some other topic, they will find out. They also list other people, including police officers, who are also active on social media, and they go after them.



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My private information has also been preyed. Some perpetrators found out my father's name, and that my father passed away—back then, it was already 20 years ago. They sent me a text message in which they pretended to be my father, using his name, and told me that he is actually alive and that he is monitoring me. I can only see that as the business of some intelligence officers, because my father was in no way a public figure, and there was no information him on social media. The police couldn't find out any information about the sender of that text message.

I have also been physically followed, and I have been filmed while giving—ironically—a panel presentation about how hate speech threatens freedom of speech.

What the Fuck? Paper—I'm sorry—is a fake news site online, a pro-Kremlin hate speech site. It is called *What the Fuck? Paper*, or *WTF Paper*. Their correspondent followed me physically and put everything I said in a really nasty context.

What else? Oh yeah, of course, police also found, as part of their investigations, that one guy—one person—working with the Finnish Broadcasting Company, so my colleague, had also participated in my stalking, by assisting one of the main suspects of the stalking, who happens to work for the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, which is basically Putin's think-tank, and is led by intelligence officers.

My colleague was suspected by police of providing information about my work assignments as well as my whereabouts, my location, to the guy who worked for Russian security services, and who had started the stalking campaign. The guy, my colleague, was not prosecuted—there are reasons for that—by the prosecutor, but there was evidence of what the police found—undeniable. So, yes, I have been stalked also in my own workplace.

Q114 **Chair:** Rana, do you want to come back on anything?

Rana Rahimpour: No.

Q115 **Royston Smith:** It is as fascinating as it is harrowing to hear your accounts of what happens to you. We don't get—some of us may, I don't know—anything like the harassment you are talking about, although we get our share of it. What can we do about it? Not very much. From a UK point of view, with our influence, funding, relationships around the world, what can the UK do to use that influence to improve and protect media freedom? Whoever wants to go first.

Jessikka Aro: Can you please, like the United States, also start real counter-intelligence and criminal investigations of the activities of the Russian troll factory, and demand information from social media companies how specifically the troll factory has been influencing the British audience as well as the international one?

Because that is the question I have been asking Facebook: please, let me know, as a journalist, are there some troll factory-related influence



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operations ongoing against Finns or related people? They don't give any information; they say they don't have it. So, I don't think that they even investigate it, unless they are pushed to investigate, just like the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence pushed them to investigate. Only after that did they start to provide information.

Beata Balogová: I also think there should be communication with countries such as Hungary and Malta, stressing the importance of press freedom and not legitimising some representatives of these countries just to maintain formal contacts. That is a very important thing, also as regards the general Hungarian public, because then the public is confused.

Viktor Orbán is travelling around Europe and coming back. They see from his propaganda factory all the reports of whom he met, all the handshakes, and the general public is not getting the feeling that he is actively criticised for his take on the press and the damage he has done to press freedom.

Perhaps another issue is, when discussing hate speech legislation, free speech and defamation, trying to separate those things. For example, my experience is that several politicians say that they do not want to change our defamation laws because of hate speech. But those are different issues.

Several countries, for example even Slovakia, maintain very severe defamation laws. Defamation of public officials is more severely punished than defamation of a normal member of the public. They say that we don't want to cancel bad legislation because of hate speech, but hate speech is something different. Making a clearer differentiation between these two issues would be helpful and would prevent Governments from abusing that issue.

As I mentioned at the beginning, in several countries there are trials of a political redefinition of journalism. For example, Viktor Orbán is toying with this idea; it is also happening in Slovakia. We have to define journalism and journalists, because today everybody can claim to be a journalist, but the moment that a politically elected body comes up with a definition of journalism is very dangerous. Perhaps reminding these countries that we have an internationally accepted definition of journalism—the Council of Europe defined what journalism is—would be helpful. Then some of these local politicians might push for a definition that might—you know, they are toying with the idea of establishing licensing councils that would give licences to journalists. At the moment, if politicians are members of this council, which would license people to be a journalist, that is very dangerous.

In the Czech Republic, Communist party members came up with the idea that journalists should be elected to public institutions for a four-year term. There is a dangerous tendency to toy with the state and for politicians to take hold of this definition, saying that they should be the ones to say who is a journalist.



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Rana Rahimpour: We are very realistic about Iran and what can be expected. We know that the country feels isolated and it doesn't play by the international rules. We are grateful for what has already been done. We know that the FCO has raised our case several times. We know that former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson has raised it in bilateral meetings with Iranian diplomats and that Jeremy Hunt has done the same. The Persian Service is extremely grateful for this.

We would love this to continue, but we would also love the UK to ask other countries to do the same. At the moment, this is not a British broadcasting issue; it is an attack on the freedom of the press. We know there are other Persian news services in the rest of Europe. In the Czech Republic we have Radio Free Europe, which has a Persian service, and there is Deutsche Welle Persian. We have other countries whose journalists have come under similar attacks, not as harshly as the BBC Persian Service staff, but we know that they have experienced similar problems. If the UK can ask other countries to raise this with Iran eventually—the country doesn't respond to too much pressure, but if the right amount of pressure is applied they do respond to it. We would be grateful if you can carry on with that.

Also, I think there is lack of understanding in other Government Departments. The Foreign Office is very well aware of what is going on, but I don't think the Home Office is on the same page. The UK can help when it comes to family members' visas, so they can come to the UK to visit colleagues who work at the Persian Service. We have elderly parents who can't get visas. Sometimes they are Afghans; as immigrants in Iran they can't own anything and when they apply for a visa it is refused, because they can't prove that they would go back to Iran. They are in their 80s and 90s. Then, the colleague can't go to Iran to visit his elderly parents. That is something that the Home Office can help with. The rest is in the hands of Iran and it is very difficult, but visas can be done in a better way.

Beata Balogová: Can I make one more point? I don't know the level of experience of the British police and the investigators who are investigating hate speech or the harassment of journalists. If they have experience to share with countries like Slovakia, Hungary or the Czech Republic, where this is now just coming up and where journalists are becoming more aware that they can turn to the police for help when they face intimidation or threats, that would be helpful, because my experience is that members of the police are not best suited to deal with these kinds of complaints to the police.

Q116 **Ian Murray:** May I ask a very brief follow-up question to Beata, who mentioned the Council of Europe? What message do you think it sends out to journalists, and indeed wider society, when the Council of Europe is about to agree that Russia can re-enter the Council of Europe without any sanction whatsoever, essentially because the Council of Europe wants its money? What message do you think it sends to journalists, and regimes that persecute them, if Russia can do what it likes with impunity



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and be allowed into our international structures?

Beata Balogová: It's not only Russia; that was my point. Institutions, including European institutions, and countries that claim to carry responsibility for western democracy, do much harm if they clearly legitimise autocratic tendencies and rulers, because it's then very difficult for us as journalists to refer to positive examples from those countries; these autocratic leaders would argue, "But we are accepted. We can attend these meetings."

If you look at Viktor Orbán, he routinely says that he is criticised by the bureaucrats of Brussels, and he says, "I am meeting with these politicians. I have good relations with them." He says that it is only EPP party politics that they are unhappy with him. A more consistent international response to these violations would send more support to the opposition in these countries, and to civil society, and people who are brave enough to criticise them from inside.

Q117 **Catherine West:** Do you think the UK should provide financial assistance to independent media abroad, whether directly or indirectly?

Beata Balogová: It's a tricky question. If so, I think that financial assistance shouldn't be direct in any way; I think it should go through foundations, and that the role should be defined very carefully.

I would appeal to any Government or any international organisation not to try to train journalists in these countries, because the problem in Hungary is not that we don't have enough investigative journalists. What happens is that very often the money is defined as being for the training of investigative journalists. In some of these independent projects, they train each other to death, because that is how they can channel the money that they are getting from foundations to pay for their real work. They have to trick the system in order to use the money effectively.

In the community of Slovak journalists, or Czech journalists, any project or any proposal to train journalists how to do investigation is taken with much scepticism, because a foreign journalist who comes to Slovakia doesn't know the context or the language, and there is no way that they can train people there in how to do investigative journalism.

The fact is that in these countries, you do have a community of great journalists. They are good journalists; they just need to share experiences: how to fundraise for projects; paywalls; how to run a small enterprise or start-up. These are things that are useful for these projects, but it's not investigation.

As for financing the operation of a news outlet itself, it might be counterproductive exactly because of what we are saying: it would encourage further the criticism that these outlets are financed by foreign forces.

Q118 **Catherine West:** Would you say that is the same for the role of the BBC abroad? Obviously, that is a known brand, so what about in the context



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of it being the BBC? Do the BBC's operations support or undermine local journalism abroad?

Rana Rahimpour: I am not sure about the question.

Catherine West: We are thinking about what the role is of the UK Government. What recommendations should the Committee write about what the Government should do?

Rana Rahimpour: I believe that the Persian Service has been very successful. It has changed the way local media and even state television cover news and stories. They have tried to at least look impartial for certain stories, though not all the time. It is not just in news; the Persian Service has also been extremely successful on social matters. It has introduced topics, such as racism and sexism, that did not exist in Iranian national dialogue. The Persian Service introduced these things, and people are much more sensitive than they were 10 years ago.

The existence of the Persian Service has been very successful, but any relations with any local media is dangerous. One has to be very careful, because it is almost impossible to guarantee the safety of people. The Persian Service refuses to work with any local journalists, or even cameramen, because it is simply too dangerous for them.

Q119 **Chair:** The FCO has done various things, and has said that its priority will be to help different countries reform their laws to protect, not constrain, media freedom. Will that approach help?

Jessikka Aro: Definitely, of course. It is about time someone took the lead on that. I compared some of the legislation relating to online crime, online harassment, the protection of journalists and regulating social media companies in different countries. There are massive differences in the spirit of the laws, the laws themselves, and their implementation. Even in the European Union area, practice is completely different. You are lucky if you happen to live in Scandinavia, where the justice system works really well, laws are quite well obeyed, and the police and prosecutors work, but in many countries in Eastern Europe, the situation is something else. There is much to do there.

For example, as Beata mentioned, it would help to have even the simplest help in a situation involving hate speech that is targeted all over the Europe and the US. If journalists are threatened online, it is really serious. It is a crime, and the police need to investigate—period. It needs to go through the court process. If you could support that happening in more countries, you would greatly help journalism, freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

Even in Finland, we have had some cases in which the police did not investigate smaller threats or individual cases. That is really not reassuring for a journalist. You feel like you have nobody covering your back. If you are alone and in danger, you do not know who will help you, if not the police. I have heard about so many people thinking of giving up this great profession because of the deteriorating security situation; it is crashing



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down. Young journalists do not want to subject themselves to something like this. The biggest harassment cases have a chilling effect on the wider community. It is urgent.

Beata Balogová: It is helpful to us journalists if we can point to a positive international example. I will give just one concrete example from Slovakia: after the murder of Ján Kuciak, we got a promise from the Government that they will change press legislation, inserting more paragraphs to protect journalists. They did open up press legislation, but only to grant politicians a right of reply if they felt in any way hurt or that their dignity was harmed by a report. That is what they did. When there is an international example that we who criticise domestic legislation can point at, it is always helpful.

Rana Rahimpour: This is at a time when Donald Trump is going for a free press. I am glad that the FCO have taken up his calls and are highlighting the fact that a free press is important. The timing could not be better. Thank you!

Chair: That's not something you often hear here.

Q120 **Catherine West:** Can I ask whether you have any more specifics on the EU picture? Obviously, while we remain members of the EU we have quite a lot of say, I would hope, over some of this. You said that the EU should be stronger about the Malta situation—Daphne. What specific recommendations could we write up? What levers could we pull in the European context? You said that the rapporteur model is not so good. I think the appointment was quite recent; our briefing said it happened at the end of May, which is last month. It has taken them a long time. Obviously, we need the evidence. Is there a policing mechanism within the EU, or could one be established?

Beata Balogová: I do not think it is because of a lack of international attention that there has been no result in the case of Malta. Slovakia is a positive example. Really, it is either IPI or the Committee to Protect Journalists, or even the European Parliament. They put a lot of pressure on Slovak authorities, and so in Slovakia, there has been progress. The mastermind of the murder is now in pre-trial custody, so I do think that international pressure works.

However, in Malta, as the corruption is so widespread, it is very difficult for us to say, "This would be helpful", because I just do not know. I do not think that one more appointee, or one more person who would specifically pay attention to the case, would change something. I do not want to sound too pessimistic. In Slovakia, there is a positive story, because after the murder there were massive protests, and the voice of a critical press did make a difference. The Prime Minister stepped down, and the Minister of the Interior stepped down, and that was thanks to international attention.

Q121 **Chair:** The last thing I wanted to ask was whether public criticism of the Government or public support of journalists from the British Government



helps or hinders. Does it put them at risk, or does it actually back them up?

Rana Rahimpour: There is a fine line, especially for the BBC—a very fine line. The Iranian Government accuses the BBC of being the propaganda machine of Britain, and it is very difficult to explain, because in Iran, we do not have a public broadcaster. In their psyche, you are either private or you are a state news channel, so for them, it is very difficult to understand that we are not receiving emails from the Foreign Office every morning telling us which stories to cover. There is no independent media as such, so it is very difficult to make it clear that public support from the British Government does not mean that we are not independent.

On the other hand, the BBC started the campaign to go public about the harassment two years ago, which seems, to a certain degree, to have increased the harassment of family members. Going public and putting some degree of pressure on the Iranian authorities has worked to an extent—it has by no means stopped the harassment—but there is a very fine line, especially when it comes to the British Government and the BBC and the relationship between the two.

Q122 **Chair:** We sadly know that the Iranian Government watch Committee hearings. We saw evidence of that a while ago, when somebody was mentioned here and her sentence was increased, so we are extremely grateful for your courage in coming forward, and we hope that your families do not suffer for your integrity.

One thing that particularly struck me—forgive me; bluntly, I am not terribly surprised at oppression in Iran or Russia—is the corruption of the political system that you describe in countries in the European Union. That is a huge concern, because clearly it calls into question the basic laws that underpin civil and economic rights, certainly in the European Union.

Beata Balogová: Excuse me for jumping in on your speech, but I am very emotional about that, because it really shows that you can lose democracy in a completely democratic way. These public officials are elected, and they feel that, once they are elected, nobody has the right to recall them from their work if they do not act in line with the interests of the public. What we see in Hungary is extremely concerning, because it shows that a combination of a majoritarian electoral system, the loss of a critical press and an autocratic leader is fatal to democracy.

Q123 **Chair:** Would you say that some European Union states are now really just Potemkin democracies?

Beata Balogová: I think Hungary is. Hungary can no longer be called a liberal democracy, and I do not believe that there is such thing as illiberal democracy. It is not even a deviation from democracy; it is a separate type of new autocracy that grew out of a post-communist country. Hungary has been the most advanced country in the region, which is why what is happening there is very concerning. I am in contact with a lot of Hungarian journalists. There are excellent journalists working as graphic people or photographers because they lost their jobs.



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In Hungary, except one German-owned TV channel, you do not have a bigger media that reaches outside the capital to people in the countryside. Viktor Orbán always says, "Look, we have over 300 independent media", but those are mostly smaller projects that do not have huge reach. That combination has a really serious impact.

Also, Orbán's rhetoric of using George Soros as the villain inspired other politicians. In Slovakia, we are routinely accused of being agents of George Soros if we are critical of the Government, or talk critically abroad about the Government. This ends any public discourse, and it is very dangerous because it supports antisemitic tendencies in the public. It really should have no place in the European Union.

Chair: Thank you very much. That was extremely powerful testimony. We are all very grateful for your courage generally, particularly today.