PROTOCOL

FOR ONLINE SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS (WITH A FOCUS ON WOMEN JOURNALISTS)

Association of Journalists
of Macedonia

FEP EFJ EJF FEF

CONFEDERATION **SYNDICAT** EUROPEÆN **TRADE UNION**

Title: Protocol for online safety of journalists (with a focus on women journalists)

The protocol is prepared by a working group consisting of:
- Nikola Dujovski, Faculty of Security, Skopje, University "Ss. Kliment Ohridski", Bitola
- Jasna Bachovska Nedic, Faculty of law "Iustinianus Primus" Skopje
- Evi Shkopi, journalist
- Kristina Atovska, journalist
- Sashka Cvetkovska, journalist
- Toni Angelovski, Assistant to the Minister of Interior in the Department of Public Relations and Strategic Affairs

Members of the working group from AJM:
- Dragan Sekulovski
- Mladen Chadikovski

Publisher: Association of journalists of Macedonia
Project: "Trade Unions for a Fair Recovery"
English translation: Olivera Celeska
Graphic design: AJM

December 2022, Skopje

Aware of the serious online challenges and threats that journalists, especially women journalists and media workers, face in their line of work,

Driven by the need for greater online safety, as a basic prerequisite for free and unimpeded reporting**,**

Willing to cooperate amongst ourselves, which will contribute to the effective protection of women journalists and other media workers,

Convinced that, only through full commitment of all involved institutions, will adequate protection and unobstructed functioning of the media be possible,

In accordance with the existing legislation of the Republic of North Macedonia, we publicly present the new

---

PROTOCOL

for Online safety of Journalists (with a Focus on Women Journalists)

> FOREWORD <

At a time when we all have the opportunity to feel how powerful a tool the internet is and how much the daily development of humanity depends on its use, unfortunately, we also have the opportunity to feel the downsides and the abuse carried out by individuals or organized groups, with the main goal of attaining their unscrupulous interests to negate modern democratic life.

Precisely during the drafting of this protocol, we are witnessing the hybrid war to which we are exposed as a society, which is aimed at causing fear and panic among the population by sending bomb threat emails in schools, shopping centres, facilities of vital significance for the state, etc.

In parallel with building resistance to hybrid threats, we are also building good practices for greater protection of media professionals, whose work is mostly related to the use of the Internet as a significant tool without which high-quality, timely and professional informing of the public is not possible. The data show that it is journalists, and especially women journalists, who are exposed to numerous insults, pressures and even threats sent through social media, with the main goal of disrupting free and independent journalism, which is a pillar of the democratic values of Macedonian society.

During the preparation of this protocol, extensive analyses were made and volumes of modern literature, laws and by-laws, protocols, guidelines, recommendations and other documents, as well as numerous institutional practices were consulted, in order to offer the best approach for greater online protection and safety of journalists, both male and female. In order to provide a sufficiently comprehensive picture of the challenges faced by journalists, and especially women

journalists, which will enable the development of real recommendations presented in the form of a Protocol, with the aim of establishing a functional mechanism for greater safety and prevention of violations of the rights of journalists (especially of women journalists) via the Internet, the following analyses were prepared:

1. **The state of safety of journalists and media** workers in the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM), and their experiences when their safety is threatened via the Internet, with a focus on the gender perspective and ethnicity;

2. **The experiences of women journalists** from other countries with online threats and attacks;

3. **Online safety of journalists** through the prism of legal solutions and with a focus on the gender perspective - at home, in the region and in the EU

4. **Protocols for online safety of journalists** and media workers and other similar documents in the region and the EU with a focus on the gender perspective

5. **Practices, opportunities and capacities** of the Ministry of Interior of RNM to protect the safety of journalists, especially women journalists, in cases of attacks and threats via the Internet.

The analyses provided significant data and a good structure from which the best recommendations and practices were extracted, which are an integral part of this Protocol.

> PRIMARY PURPOSE OF THE PROTOCOL <

Online safety of journalists, both female and male, is a basic pre-requisite for unimpeded, professional, timely and high-quality informing of the public. By guaranteeing the safety of journalists and media workers, the state fulfils the basic premises of democratic governance, and a society in which every individual will feel safe while performing their work duties, is the aspiration of all democratic institutions.

Online safety is an additional challenge for many reasons. The virtual world, in which many significant processes take place, largely exceeds the borders, capacities and possibilities of a single country or regions in Europe. Each country, and often many European and other international institutions, pay significant attention to online safety protocols, mostly aimed at additional protection of the vulnerable categories, especially children, of security institutions, of critical infrastructure protection, but also of numerous professionals, one of the most significant of which are certainly the media workers. Every state must introduce effective measures to protect against attacks aimed at silencing those who exercise their right to freedom of expression, including journalists, with a focus on women journalists, a group that is often exposed to threats, intimidation and attacks because of their work. All threats to journalists, made online or in another way, need to be vigorously and promptly investigated, and their perpetrators must be prosecuted, and adequate compensation should be provided to the victims or their representatives. In some countries, journalists face arbitrary arrests and persecutions, oppressive political and commercial pressures, and repressive regulations. These phenomena cause fear and uncertainty among journalists and other media workers and have a devastating impact on freedom of expression in society as a whole.

When it comes to journalists, especially women journalists and media workers, online presence in accomplishing work tasks is imperative and a basic prerequisite for success in their line of work. The public nature of the work and the need to present the truth leads to the fact that their activities are monitored and evaluated by an unlimited number of Internet users (both from the country and from abroad). It is precisely this kind of exposure of women journalists/media workers to the "court of the public" that often leads to a potential threat to their security, safety and normal working conditions. The threats and challenges vary from extremely harmless (mainly upsetting) to serious threats, for which legal measures should be taken for protection and prevention.

Considering these indicators, the safety of journalists in general, and now also on the Internet or the online safety of journalists is a current topic. It is inevitable to consider it in the context of regulation of online media through the prism of legal solutions and especially with an emphasis on the gender perspective.

This protocol aims to offer solutions that will contribute to every journalist, especially women journalists, to feel safe, but also to know how to act in cases of threats and attacks made over the internet, with the main goal of receiving adequate protection from the competent institutions. This protection should be complete and long-lasting, enabling a working atmosphere in which the journalist will not stop activities, change priorities or give up further research or reporting on the topic they are covering.

CURRENT STATUS

This is an alley often taken to violate this right of another person. While part of society is fighting for gender equality, women are the most common victims of attacks through social media platforms. Being a woman and a journalist is a double "burden", as it is an even more "tempting" target of harassment/attacks/threats on social media.

The analysis of the situation in our country and in the countries of the region shows that women journalists are particularly exposed to threats and attacks that occur daily on social media. Social media have provided a new way of freedom of expression. Every day, especially journalists/editors/anchors face psychological pressure due to comments, statuses or private messages sent by individuals, which aim to silence and intimidate them. The most common targets are women in the media that cover topics related to basic human rights, topics traditionally considered "suitable for men", topics that expose corruption in certain institutions or individuals who abuse their office, topics that are still considered taboo. Unfortunately, the online harassment of journalists is already a global phenomenon, which has not bypassed North Macedonia. The aim of such attacks is to silence, stigmatize and intimidate women working in the media.

Some countries have achieved more in terms of online protection, especially when it comes to women journalists, so it is precisely such examples, supported by appropriate research and practices imposed by international organizations, that are a guide for the preparation of this protocol and for building an authentic domestic approach to greater protection of journalists on the Internet.

The conducted research showed the "hotspots" in all the countries in the region, and we can freely say in a good part of Europe as well,

about how frequent harassment is on social media, who these harassments come from, in what form they are presented, how journalists react, whether they report these cases, how seriously do journalists or institutions take them, do they get support, in what form and from whom? To what extent do journalists consider turning to the institutions as the right move in such cases, what does our country have in common with neighbouring countries in this regard, how do the institutions there deal with such cases? Journalists face constant threats during their work, receiving them out in the field and on online platforms. In the field, the insults are mostly verbal, and online they are mainly based on gender, but there are also those that refer to ethnicity and religion, depending on the topic that the woman journalist is covering. Despite feeling threatened, very few journalists approached the authorities to report the cases. And when they do report such a thing, there is no epilogue. In some cases, the media outlets where they work give them moral support, but if the situation is more serious, some of the journalists say that they feel left alone confronted with danger, even though the reason they were threatened is the work they do. They say they feel exposed to danger and unprotected.

Statistics from the member states of the European Union show that women journalists are more exposed to threats than their male colleagues, especially in the form of online harassment, rape and death threats, as well as incitement to hatred based on gender. These attacks are often the result of orchestrated campaigns aimed at discrediting or silencing women journalists, which can lead to self-censorship, withdrawal from online communities or even decisions to leave the profession. Women journalists reporting on topics related to gender equality are particularly exposed to threats and retaliation.

Despite the numerous shortcomings, it is evident that in the last few years, things have changed significantly in a positive direction.

Namely, during 2021, one case ended with a final decision in favour of the threatened journalist. A citizen was sentenced to one year and eight months in prison, because in 2020, through the "Telegram" application, they issued death threats. During 2019, 2020 and 2021, a total of 23 attacks and threats against journalists were recorded. In 2021, AJM recorded 5 attacks against journalists and media workers and one death threat, 3 of which against women journalists. Cooperation with the Ministry of Interior proceeds smoothly and is based on mutual trust and understanding. Unfortunately, there is a lack of closer cooperation with the Public Prosecutor's Office, which is a key link in the processing of criminal acts related to online threats to the work of journalists. In the course of 2022, at the previous requests of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia, as well as the journalists' trade union, and in order to fulfil the obligations of the state, in accordance with the recommendations for the safety of journalists from the Council of Europe, the Public Prosecutor's Office Skopje appointed a contact public prosecutor for subjects related to the safety of journalists. This is a positive step for improving the safety of journalists and media workers, and we also believe that with the amendments to the criminal code and the introduction of additional protection for journalists and media workers, awareness will be raised about the need for journalists to work in completely free media and in democratic conditions according to the high global standards.

HOW TO ACT IN CASES OF ONLINE THREATS

The Department for Cyber-Crime and Digital Forensics (DCCDF) at the Ministry of the Interior is responsible for these cases, but also the organizational units for cyber-crime at the individual internal affairs sections are responsible. DCCDF takes measures following reports of criminal acts in the field of cyber-crime, which are prosecuted ex officio. In relation to threats or psychological harassment, threats to journalists via social media, web portals, websites and any other form via the internet, measures and activities are taken in accordance with Art. 144 paragraph 4 "Endangering security" and Art. 394-d "Dissemination of racist and xenophobic material through a computer system" and with an appropriate submission informs the competent BPPO and acts according to the instructions given by the PO.

In relation to the reporting process, a record of receiving a report is submitted to the DCCDF or to the nearest police station. If the event is reported via e-mail (at the address cybercrime@moi.gov.mk), the email is registered by the Ministry of Interior as a report and appropriate follow-up steps are then taken. If it is incomplete, the applicant is contacted for clarification and delivery of evidence to confirm the reported event. Furthermore, with an appropriate submission, the competent Basic Public Prosecutor's Office is notified and the instructions given by the Public Prosecutor (PO) are followed.

How exactly is it handled if a journalist reports that his/her safety is threatened? After receiving the report, for example, in IAS Skopje, the PO is immediately notified ex officio. At the same time, the work with police excerpts continues, if necessary, a request or order is provided by the Public Prosecutor's Office to provide data from the social

network or from the web-portal where the threat was published. If the perpetrator is known, they are invited to an official interview and further measures and activities, operative and investigative actions are taken under the direction and coordination of the Public Prosecutor's Office, with the aim of documenting and providing data and information as material evidence, for the successful conduct of the criminal procedure. After documenting the criminal-legal event and establishing the identity of the perpetrator, criminal charges are submitted to the competent PPO.

In an initiated procedure for providing computer data, PO and the police: are not sure whether the requested data exists, whether they will be provided based on the initiated procedure, what is the real time limit in which it can be expected that the requested data will be provided... Of course, all of this affects the course of the pre-investigation and investigation procedure because there are currently cases that have not been completed because they are awaiting a response from the Internet providers, although the Public Prosecutor's Office and the police are not sure if they will receive the requested data. At the same time, there are cases that cannot be completed efficiently precisely because computer data is missing, which was not requested in a timely manner. What should be particularly pointed out is that: the efficiency in solving the cases for which it is necessary to provide computer data, which could represent potential evidence in the procedure, has decreased.

LET'S BUILD A BETTER APPROACH TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS ONLINE

In essence, there are numerous experiences that have already been applied in other countries, some of them with good results, some with partial, and some without any noticeable impact on greater online safety for journalists. A successful response to these modern threats is only possible through the full and professional involvement of journalists, editors, media owners, the police, the public prosecutor's office and other competent state bodies. Our opinion is that some of the experiences that can be real, measurable and applicable to our occasions and needs are:

STEP 1 - REPORTING:

A) Creating a culture of protection against online threats in newsrooms. Considering that women journalists spend a large part of their working time in their newsrooms, and share many common activities with their colleagues, our opinion is that this step is fundamental for building an approach that will prevent the consequences of possible threats. The support in the newsroom must not be left out, the journalist has the most trust in those closest to her, in the editor, in the media outlet manager. They will support her along the process, to immediately and without delay report the case to the police, and for the attacked journalist to be protected for the necessary period. Colleagues and the editor should assess how the journalist is handling the threats, whether she needs additional steps for support or protection, and whether she has all the resources to deal with the situation. They should be in constant contact with the Ministry of Interior and other law enforcement authorities, take an interest in the case and provide support for additional protection;

B) Establishing clear reporting lines and channels. AJM will provide full support for women journalists subjected to online threats. The permanent telephone line, available for every female journalist for support and advice, will be able to provide any kind of information, as well as free legal aid offered by a lawyer for AJM members. From the method of reporting to the police, providing legal and psychological support, other procedural steps, all the way to several practical tips for the journalist's personal safety. The Ministry of the Interior has designated a contact person from the DCCDF for journalists who will receive threats on the Internet, with support for security procedures, reporting the case, protection of evidence, timely provision of all possible information, etc. This activity has been confirmed after receiving consent from the Public Security Bureau in the Ministry of Interior.

C) Documenting each individual case of online attack or threat. The Ministry of Interior already documents all received reports of online threats, but it is necessary to establish clear procedures that will increase confidence in the capacities of the police. The police should be in constant coordination with the Public Prosecutor's Office and other domestic and international factors and will actively work to quickly find the perpetrator of the crime and process them before the competent Public Prosecutor's Office. AJM can also keep a register of reported criminal acts committed against journalists on the Internet. According to the data, as well as updates to the files, AJM will have insight and can obtain information on behalf of the journalist about how far the case has progressed and whether continuous measures are being taken to find and catch the perpetrator.

STEP 2 - RISK ASSESSMENT:

A) Risk of physical injuries. According to the received message, MoI will conduct a risk analysis of whether there is a possibility that the threats on the Internet will be transferred into the physical reality and the journalist will be physically threatened (she or a person close to her), and make an assessment of whether an increase in the security of the specific person who is subject to threat is needed. This is especially significant if we consider that in almost all cases of murders and physical attacks on journalists, they have previously been the subject of online threats.

B) Danger of psychological consequences. Any serious threat can have psychological consequences. Depending on the ability to resist such threats, the psychological reaction of the attacked person can range from mild, to moderate, to an extremely worrying situation, in which the journalist's ability to perform her tasks is temporarily called into question. At each stage of recovery, the journalist will receive full support for easier handling of the consequences.

C) Danger of reputation damage. This challenge is always present, but the fact that journalists are also public figures who are constantly exposed to the "court of the public", they do not need to worry much about reputation damage, especially for views expressed by anonymous bots, whose goal is precisely to discredit each person which does not work according to their stated goals.

STEP 3 - SUPPORTING MECHANISMS:

A) Support for digital security;
B) Legal support;
C) Emotional and psychological support;
D) Temporary leave, change of location or change of workplace;
E) Providing public support;
F) Mitigation of Internet attacks;

All the listed steps in the supporting mechanisms have the same goal - building an approach that will significantly change the circumstances of work when receiving online threats, so if they are elaborated in detail and fully implemented, they will enable a clear response, which goes beyond the limits of a single newsroom, one media outlet, one ministry, but will represent our joint social response and guarantee of free and independent journalism.

STEP 4 - FOLLOW-UP AND RE-ASSESSMENT / ROLES AND TASKS

A) Internet Protection Coordinator;
B) Management;
C) Editors;
D) Moderators;
D) Journalists;

This step refers to strengthening the capacities of the media and their employees. AJM can help if requested, especially in the preparation of training programs and plans, both for journalists and for editors and management teams of professional media. Editors have a very significant role in the process of strengthening the capacities of the media, especially in the area of protecting and promoting the rights of employees. They should be sufficiently trained and prepared for

the procedures and processes for reporting online threats. Their concern should be constant, it is good to be ready to support the journalist who received threats and to put the capacities of the media for better protection and care for the employee.

The Internet changes daily and increasingly invades free space. In such conditions, the media should also adapt, use the benefits of the modern world and set themselves in the direction of a modern, attractive, open approach to support for every female journalist who faces a threat.
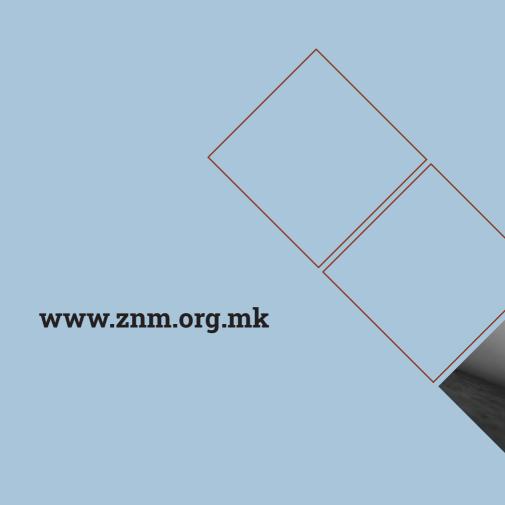
PROTOCOL FOR ONLINE SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS
(WITH A FOCUS ON WOMEN JOURNALISTS)

> INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION <

The things that you should pay particular attention to are:

1. **Support for women journalists,** members of vulnerable categories and women journalists who report on gender issues - they are most often exposed to threats on the Internet;

2. **Transparency** and reporting cases of attack and/or threats - without any delay and calculations, nor with mistrust that the police will not take the necessary actions to find and catch the perpetrator of the crime;

3. **The time factor** - reporting must not be delayed, sometimes minutes are important, and seconds crucial for the success of the investigation;

4. **Campaigns to raise awareness** and provide information - campaigns always produce results. More campaigns, with more information, which will reach as many people as possible at the right time, and especially the concerned journalists;

5. **Online attacks** against women journalists also contain hate speech, which increases the scope of crimes against journalists, but also the possibility of finding the perpetrator**;**

6. **Online violence** in Macedonia and the region leads to self-censorship and makes women journalists avoid topics of high politics, but it also leads to the exclusion of women from public life;

7. **Attacks on women journalists** are often orchestrated by power centres (political parties, business corporations), so the response should be aimed at protection from such attacks.

8. **It is necessary to introduce extensive internal mechanisms** for the protection of journalists on the Internet.

9. **Amendments to the Criminal Code** and the Law on Criminal Procedure are expected to enable criminal-legal protection of journalists as officials, thereby speeding up all processes that are conducted for the protection of journalists.

10. **In addition to AJM,** the media themselves should take a more active role in protecting the rights of journalists and media workers.

11. **The main observations of stakeholders** refer to the non-implementation, impunity or selective implementation of the Criminal Code, the Law on Defamation and Insult, poor practice in the implementation of the Law on Protection against Discrimination on the Internet, daily and obvious violations of the Copyright Law.

12. **There is a need for additional regulation** or self-regulation of the media space, with instructions and guidelines that will clarify the numerous uncertainties that relate to the application of the standards of online journalistic work/writing, namely to: sources of information, the way in which media content is transmitted, respect for privacy, respect for authorship and other important classic issues.

13. **Effective protection** of journalists in cyberspace will be a priority task, but at the same time freedom of expression should not be endangered. Filtering and blocking content online, especially on social media, will be a particular challenge.

14. **A training system for journalists,** police officers and other law enforcement professionals, which will make them more sensitive to online safety issues.

15. **Last, but not least -** active involvement of the PPO as a partner of the AJM and MoI in the fight for greater protection of journalists and media workers, who uphold the democratic values in Macedonian society..

www.znm.org.mk