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Research Paper

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Getting the truth out

The professional practices and roles of Central European foreign correspondents covering the war in Ukraine

Abstract: **The study examines the professional practices of foreign correspondents reporting on the war in Ukraine for Central European media. In-depth interviews with representatives of leading media organizations in Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary (N = 11) show that the correspondents distrust the Ukrainian authorities as a source of information and are skeptical of local Ukrainian fixers. They see themselves in a conflict between their personal convictions and journalistic standards, as they are not neutral towards the war but try to remain objective in their reporting. The influence of Russia has been noticeable in all three countries since the start of the war.**

Keywords: foreign correspondent, Fixer, propaganda, Ukraine, Russia, Eastern and Central Europe, interviews

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, more than 12,000 foreign and Ukrainian journalists have been accredited to report on the war in Ukraine (WARC 2024a). The list of injured or killed reporters grows longer every day (WARC 2025). The foreign journalists also include correspondents from Central and Eastern European media. While those foreign correspondents who work for large international media have professional teams in Ukraine, journalists from smaller foreign media rarely work with more than two people: themselves and a photographer or videographer. Some do not have the financial means to rent a car, hire a translator or even buy an armband that says »Press«. In this study, we ask: What influences the reporting of Bulgarian, Romanian and Hungarian foreign correspondents covering Ukraine and how do they define their role as journalists covering the war in Ukraine for media in their home country?

Literature review

So-called »parachute journalists« (HAMILTON/JENNER 2004), who only come briefly to report on a country far away from their home country, tend toward stereotypical coverage (LUNDSTROM/MITCHELL 2002; NOTHIAS 2020). Ethnocentrism and »us« versus »them« narratives are common among them (FONDREN/HAMILTON/MCCUNE 2019). Such poorly differentiated reports arise due to deadline pressure, insufficient knowledge of the country and the restrictions journalists face when contacting local actors and authorities (HANNERZ 2004). However, well-traveled and experienced correspondents generally value proximity, empathy and a realistic assessment of existing risks (HANNERZ 2007). They want to aid in painting a comprehensive picture of the situation on the ground and strive for accurate and fair reporting that includes different perspectives and people (ZHANG/JENKINS 2023). Yet, war reporting is still dominated by men and is characterized by sexism. Although the number of women war reporters has increased, they are often not accepted by their colleagues and are hindered in their work (PALMER/MELKI 2016). Almost all of them say they have experienced discrimination, some of them sexual assault (STEINER 2017).

Foreign reporting depends on the work of local contributors (»fixers«), both logistically and in terms of content. The roles, motivations and principles of fixers have already been studied (GRYTSAI 2023; ERICKSON/HAMILTON 2006; TUMBER/WEBSTER 2006; PALMER/FONTAN 2007; MURRELL 2014; PALMER 2019). Their tasks include driving, hotel bookings, security management, source procurement, interview organization, phone calls, etc. Fixers are directly involved in reporting insofar as they suggest topics and interview subjects, translate, and provide international media teams with background information (BISHARA 2006; MURRELL 2010; PALMER 2018, 2019; PALMER/FONTAN 2007; PLAUT/KLEIN 2019; KOTIŠOVÁ/DEUZE 2022). Foreign reporting depends crucially on their work, both logistically and editorially.

Journalism in Central and Eastern Europe

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in the early 1990s, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe moved toward democracy. However, Russia is still trying to influence politics and the media in these countries. Four media models exemplify the region today: a *politicized* model in Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania; *media in transition* in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Moldova; a *liberal hybrid model* in Poland, the Baltic countries, Slovenia and the Czech Republic; and an *authoritarian* model in Russia and Belarus (BOSHNAKOVA/DANKOVA 2023; DOBEK-OSTROWSKA 2015). Although

democratic standards apply in countries in transition or with a politicized media model, political influence on public broadcasting in Hungary, for example, is strong. In countries with a liberal hybrid model, media freedom is greater. The authoritarian model, on the other hand, is considered to be highly politicized. In these countries, media are mostly propaganda tools of those in power (DOBEK-OSTROWSKA 2015).

Despite some similarities, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania differ in many respects: In Hungary, media are subject to strong political influence. They predominantly disseminate the views of the government. Private media companies are also closely linked to the government. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán himself has a stake in various media outlets and maintains good relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Bulgarian media are also heavily influenced by politics and business interests. There is hardly any critical reporting, for example on corruption (BOSHNAKOVA/DANKOVA 2023). In Romania, the media offering is more diverse, but public and private broadcasters often follow the government line and there is little transparency in media financing. Social media such as TikTok and Telegram proved to be a gateway for Russian propaganda during the elections in early December 2024, leading the European Commission to initiate proceedings against TikTok under the Digital Services Act (EU COMMISSION 2024). The freedom of the media is therefore under threat in all three countries. Economic interests prevent comprehensive and independent reporting. Advertising corruption is commonplace (LAUK 2008). To this day, the Central and Eastern European media systems are strongly controlled by the government, political parties, individuals and commercial enterprises; in contrast, civil society organizations and religious and ethnic minorities have significantly less influence (GROSS 2004). According to Reporters Without Borders, Romania is ranked 49th in terms of press freedom, Bulgaria 59th and Hungary 67th (RWB 2024b).

Theoretical framework

The »hierarchy-of-influences« approach (REESE 2001; SHOEMAKER/REESE 1996) provides a suitable framework for examining all the factors that shape foreign correspondents' news gathering and their (self-)understanding of their role. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) identified five levels of influence on news production: the *individual*, the *routine*, the *organizational*, *the extra-media* (later renamed »social institutions«) and the *ideological* level. These levels act separately and are at the same time intertwined in a »web of interconnected forces« (REESE 2001: 179).

The *individual* level of influence includes factors such as demographics, education, training, professional experience, creativity, attitudes, professional values and norms as well as the degree of autonomy of journalists. It illustrates that

journalists differ in their perception of the profession and that there are different understandings of the profession within and beyond national cultures. It also reveals how journalists adapt to existing conditions in order to do their job (REESE/SHOEMAKER 2018). The objectivity norm is effective *on an individual level*. It should lead to a separation of facts and opinions and encourage journalists to take different perspectives into account and to report fairly, especially in political disputes (SCHUDSON 2001).

The level of *routines* considers the influence of professional rules, norms and procedures as well as the constraints of space, time and technology. Journalists cannot always control the latter. Research has analyzed »those unstated rules and ritualized enactments that are not always made explicit« (REESE/SHOEMAKER 2018: 399).

At the organizational level, the editorial line, the size of the company, management styles and financing options influence the way in which news is obtained and prepared.

The *extra-media* level beyond journalism is of great importance as it includes governments, public relations and advertising agencies, technology companies and other influential corporations. Reese and Shoemaker (2018) explain how economic, political and cultural powers operate at this meso-level and how institutional boundaries become blurred. This extra-media level is related to the ways in which journalists justify the knowledge they produce as valuable and the practices they use to determine ›truth‹ – a framework referred to as journalistic epistemology (EKSTRÖM 2002).

Finally, at the level *of social systems*, research focuses on how media institutions function within larger systems that transcend social and national boundaries. Studies have shown that media such as television or online news adapt to global standards, while the print sector focus more on cultural particularities (REESE/SHOEMAKER 2018).

Method

For this study, interviews were conducted with journalists from three Central European countries: Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania. Of interest were factors that affect the independence of reporting, as well as the role that journalists see themselves in when reporting on the war in Ukraine for audiences in their home countries. The relatively small sample consists of eleven journalists, ten men and one woman. Four are from Bulgaria, four from Hungary and three from Romania. The fact that only one woman journalist (A) was interviewed is partly due to the fact that media companies mainly send men correspondents to Ukraine.

The eleven interviewees from Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania work as reporters, photographers, videographers and multimedia journalists. We use the term

»foreign correspondent« to refer to reporters who visit a foreign country or stay there for a longer period of time to report on events, as well as employees of established media companies that maintain a foreign office (HAMILTON/JENNER 2004). The journalists we interviewed work for public and private media (television, radio, print and online media). We do not mention their names but use abbreviations or capital letters (see Table 1) to protect their identity. The broadcast journalists worked in teams with videographers and drivers, while the journalists working for online media were alone on the ground in Ukraine. Some of the interviewees had been there since the beginning of the conflict, i.e., for months, while others had only been there for a few weeks. Four interviews took place in person and seven were conducted via Zoom between July 2022 and June 2023. The interviews lasted between one and three hours each; they were recorded and transcribed. Six of the interviews were conducted in English, four in Bulgarian and one in Romanian, with the latter being translated into English.

Results

The reporting from Ukraine differs considerably from coverage originating in countries from which the correspondents had previously reported. We look at different levels below.

Individual level

Eight of the eleven interviewees had never been to Ukraine before the war. They were reporting from and about the country for the first time because of the war. Only two, both from Hungary, had already reported on a major war, more specifically on the Bosnian War (1992-1995) and/or the war in Afghanistan (2001-2021). Most of the reporters were sent to Ukraine without any special knowledge of war and crisis journalism. They had to adapt to the challenges and dangers on the ground, as well as to dealing with disinformation and propaganda. All eleven interviewees stated that they tried to remain objective when reporting on the war in Ukraine when preparing information for their home countries. They made an effort to distinguish between facts and opinions, to adopt different perspectives and to present political positions fairly. Nevertheless, they were not on a personal and professional level (SCHUDSON 2001): They wanted Ukraine to win the war. For instance, a Hungarian journalist (I) explained how he sees the difference between neutrality and objectivity:

> I am not neutral. I'm supporting Ukraine in this war, but I'm trying to be objective. So, yes, this is a special time for journalists. And I'm aware, as I was saying this through the black-and-white story, which is quite rare even in human history.

A Romanian journalist (F) also said that he tried to maintain his objectivity but admitted that the war had an impact on his work. He said it was normal in war that »you have to choose a side, even as a journalist, even though you have to be impartial«. Another Romanian journalist (E) similarly explained that he tries to remain balanced on the ground in Ukraine, but that is not possible. He said that his reporting was »pro-Ukrainian«, and that Romanian media used »pro-Ukrainian speech« because Ukraine had been invaded; he stated: »it's hard not to be on the Ukrainian side«.

The correspondents also questioned Russia's role in the conflict. Some explained that they adopted Russian perspectives in the form of statements from the government in Moscow, which they also received from leading Western news agencies. Others said that their reports from Ukraine did not include the Russian view. Some, such as a Hungarian reporter (H), questioned the need to include the Russian side:

> I try to show the audience that this is an aggressive war against Ukraine [...] and I keep repeating in my stories that this is a black-and-white story. So, we have an aggressor, and we have a country which has been attacked. This country was attacked because of territorial claims by Russia and the imperial beliefs of Russia. So probably the audience can feel that I'm on the side of the country that has been attacked.

Some interviewees explained that they would like to report on the Russian side of the war from Russia, but that the authorities in Moscow would not grant them visas to enter the country. They also feared that their lives would be in danger if they reported on the war from Russia and that they might never be able to return to their home countries. They referred to the recent cases of international journalists who were jailed under the Foreign Agents Act, as this law »criminalizes objective reporting about the war in Ukraine« (FLACKS 2022). The correspondents also explained that they would be considered Russian »spies« by the Ukrainian government if they reported from Russia and that they would not be able to return to Ukraine.

Routine level

Respondents stated that they relied on information from international media and news agencies. They named CNN, the *New York Times*, Reuters, the Associated Press, BBC, Sky News, France 24, but said that even leading international agencies could publish inaccurate information. Bulgarian journalists working for a website referred to a report by Reuters about a cemetery for killed Ukrainian soldiers in the town of Irpin. The Bulgarian correspondents in Ukraine decided to go there. When they got to Irpin, however, the situation turned out to be different from the Reuters report. Doubts arose, and the Bulgarian journalist (D) decided not to report on it:

> It looks incredibly photogenic, some thousands of graves that are freshly dug with crosses and with wreaths. […] However, when you start walking around the cemetery, you see that these graves, although they are fresh, are from last year and the year before. We took pictures, but then we didn't broadcast and produce anything.

Other interviewees said they tended not to trust Ukrainian media because they could be patriotically biased. A Hungarian journalist (G) said that the guidelines for the media had changed. After all, Ukraine was at war, and, from the Ukrainian point of view, media reporting should not benefit the other side. He understands this:

> I don't blame them for that. Journalists are now becoming activists in Ukraine, which is also a natural thing. I mean, patriot activism. And some of them are trying to show their patriotism by writing Russian names not with a capital letter at the beginning, so writing Putin with a small »p« in their articles.

The Ukrainian news agency *Ukrinform*, the *Kyiv Independent* and the *Kyiv Post* were among the trusted national sources. One Bulgarian reporter (A) explained that she trusted them because she had heard from other journalists that they were trustworthy. Furthermore, the journalists mentioned social media, especially X (formerly Twitter), as an important source of information. There they could follow the latest developments or check local information. One Hungarian journalist said he followed several X accounts of journalists working for international news channels who were on the ground in Ukraine, as well as the accounts of leading international media, to find trustworthy information because »propaganda is big in Ukraine, and it's obvious«.

Messenger services such as WhatsApp, Viber and Telegram are also valuable sources for journalists. They often use them to communicate with colleagues, institutions and organizations. According to the interviewees, Telegram is the main source of real-time information about the war and the most important platform for political discussions. However, they said that the information in Telegram is not always reliable. A Hungarian reporter explained that the channels on Telegram related to the war could be biased, but he used the app to get information from Ukrainian and Russian officials.

Additionally, fixers play an extremely important role for the correspondents, and mutual trust is crucial when working together in extremely dangerous places. The Bulgarian reporter (A) said she was able to get by without a translator because the cameraman was half Ukrainian and half Russian. Nevertheless, she would have liked more support on the ground. However, the media she worked for did not hire fixers or translators in order to save money.

> You cannot do it without a local because you don't have the contacts. You may try to find the contacts, but you don't know the people. You don't know the customs. You don't know the background. For the personal stories, you have to go in search of them. And if you have a fixer, you don't waste the time to go and look for the stories.

The reporter explained that without a fixer and translator, it is difficult to interview decision-makers or get in touch with Ukrainians who have interesting stories to report. A Bulgarian journalist (B) added that a local fixer was also important for traveling through the country, as there were Ukrainian military checkpoints in many places. For the checkpoints, the military required a press card or password. He explained:

> The fixer can have a password key. For example, with our fixer around the checkpoints in Kyiv, there's a passcode, and it changes every day, and he knew it every day. One of the days, I remember the password was »storm« and »bee.« We stop at a checkpoint, and he just says »storm« and »bee« and we move on.

The journalists described the roles of Ukrainian fixers in different ways. A Hungarian journalist (I) spoke of a »co-journalist« and emphasized that the fixer had more knowledge than he did about the social and political dynamics in Ukrainian society. A Romanian journalist (F) described the fixer he worked with as a negotiator and described how he and his team were picked up by the Ukrainian police because they did not have press cards. They were detained for hours. The fixer spoke to the police, and the journalists were released. Another Hungarian journalist (H) explained that his fixer, who had been a marketing manager before the war, established access to sources by telling them that the correspondent worked for one of the few independent media companies in Hungary. The journalist (H) said: »After establishing this communication with the fixer, it worked out perfectly.«

Journalists take certain criteria into account when hiring a fixer. One Hungarian journalist (H) said that he was looking for a responsible person who was not pro-Russian and had good contacts with the Ukrainian authorities. Some correspondents admitted that they did not trust Ukrainian fixers because they tried to influence the reporting. They considered fixers to be patriots who were not objective. Correspondents who speak Russian or Ukrainian said they preferred not to use fixers. A long-time Hungarian journalist (K) said he did not work with fixers because he believed that »they have their agenda« and did not adhere to journalistic standards. Similarly, a Bulgarian reporter (B) said that his fixer in Mariupol was a student and that she was »very influenced by what was happening in Ukraine, and she was not impartial.«

Organizational level

The interviewees stated that the type of orders received changed over time. In the first weeks of the war, live reports were in demand. Later, the media companies that had sent them were more interested in background reports and features. Journalists working for smaller media outlets, especially websites in Romania, Hungary or Bulgaria, produced videos, multimedia stories (with photos, videos

and text) and documentaries. At the beginning of the war, TV journalists delivered between ten and 15 live broadcasts per day. The Bulgarian reporter (A) said that her media organization had asked her to make a live broadcast while they were waiting at a gas station in Moldova, looking for a toilet. They were asked by producers to describe »how the road out of Ukraine is«. A Bulgarian journalist (C) described how he and a reporter experienced the start of the war in Kyiv. They only produced a few reports because they were concentrating on live broadcasts. His media company had asked the team to broadcast live every 30 minutes. A Romanian reporter (G) explained that in the first days of the war, he broadcast at least ten live broadcasts per day from Ukraine. His station urged him to produce dramatic reports, e.g., on bombings and the destruction of buildings and shelters. Journalists working for newspapers and online providers stated that they mainly produced »standard« news in Ukraine. They divided their reports into two types: either about the impact of the war on the Ukrainian population or from the frontline of the conflict. For the first type, they reported on hospitals and whether people had access to food, water, shelter and medical care. For the second type, they traveled to the east of Ukraine, to the front line and to cities such as Bakhmut and Kharkiv. They reported on military successes, the resistance of Ukrainians and civilians who became soldiers after the war began.

The correspondents concentrated on telling personal stories and experiences, also as a way to avoid propaganda. A Hungarian correspondent (G) working for a small, independent website said his stories focused on Ukrainians who had witnessed the war first-hand, »people who witness history, what happened [...] and from their story, you will have a nice and colorful media coverage«. He added that his focus differed from that of larger media outlets, which provided information on the course of the war, interviewed Ukrainian officials and did live broadcasts on the ground. The interviewees also reported on people from Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria living in Ukraine. For their media organizations, such diaspora reports would have top priority, as this would make the extent of the war comprehensible for their audiences.

Extra-medial level

The correspondents interviewed did not trust all the information published by the Ukrainian authorities. For example, these authorities organized travel for journalists to towns and villages where Russian military forces had killed civilians and destroyed houses. A Bulgarian journalist (D) reported on one such trip organized by the Ukrainian Interior Ministry. He said when he arrived at the scene, he was surprised because the authorities showed him two bodies buried in a yard and told him that each media representative had five minutes to film the

scene. The Bulgarian journalist refused to report the story because he thought it was Ukrainian propaganda:

> I said to my colleague (videographer): This is the first time I have seen such a thing; it is not OK to report on here. […] I can easily say it is propaganda, and it probably is. Channeling of information from the authorities. Accordingly, if you check that day – I can check the date and go into the archives – it will be clear that everybody gave the same report, the media of the world.

The interviewees explained that propaganda usually involved information about the victories of the Ukrainian armed forces at the front, about Russian massacres and about violence against the Ukrainian population. There were cases in which the Ukrainian authorities wanted to prevent reporting because they feared that it could give an advantage to the Russian armed forces. For instance, a Hungarian journalist (G) had filmed a train station that had been hit by a Russian missile. Afterwards, the Ukrainian police detained him for several hours. He said: »I was told not to take pictures. But, of course, I'd have to do it because that's why I went there. And it was, it was already ruined, so there was no complete information.« Yet, the Hungarian journalist, as well as most of the other interviewees, showed understanding for the restrictions placed on their work by the Ukrainian authorities on the ground; after all, they were at war. It was also an information war between Ukraine and Russia. One Romanian journalist (E) spoke of the targeted news selection he experienced: »The information they [the Ukrainian government] give us is not complete. I don't think they give us fake news, but I do think they don't give us the whole information.«

Social system level

According to the journalists interviewed, reporting on Ukraine is important because it informs the public in their home countries about the latest developments in the conflict and because they need to know how Ukrainians are experiencing the war and the consequences of Russian aggression. They believe that comprehensive reporting is essential because of Russian influence and the spread of Russian propaganda in their home countries. Russian influence has increased since the start of the war, particularly in Hungary and Bulgaria, and the population is divided with regard to the conflict. The four Hungarian journalists cited the fact that the leading media in their country are pro-Russian and do not report independently on the war in Ukraine as reasons for this division:

> The Hungarian government is too close to Russia. And you can find a lot of proof in Hungarian public TV and media coverage that it is very biased towards the Russians, and it is very difficult to fight against this propaganda, unfortunately.

Another Hungarian correspondent (K) explained that the leading media in his country reported on »how the Russians are winning«, »how good are the

Russians«, and »how Ukrainian President Volodimir Zelensky is a puppet of the United States«. There are only a few independent, critical media outlets. However, according to another of the war correspondents, they had difficulties financing the dispatch of reporters to Ukraine. A Romanian journalist (G) described the mood in his country as being characterized by the fear that Russia could also attack Romania if Ukraine lost. Romania had supported Ukraine from the beginning of the war and the conflict was being reported on intensively, including by his medium: »We hope that Ukraine wins this war because if Ukraine loses, then the Russians will be one step closer to our borders, and we do not want that to happen.« The correspondents from Hungary and Bulgaria also expressed fear of Ukraine's defeat. Reporting on the war is therefore of crucial importance for the population in their home countries.

Additionally, according to a Romanian journalist (F), cultural proximity to Ukraine is an advantage when it comes to making contacts and building trust with people and institutions. He does not see any major differences between Romania and Ukraine. One reason for this is the shared history of the two countries:

> We [Romania and Ukraine] were also under Russian communist influence for 30 to 40 years. And we know the toughness of what Russia means, such as the living conditions and the living environment. We are not so different. Let's say, Romania is not as different in civilization to Ukraine as Britain, France, Spain, or the United States. The difference is so small, so we can adapt much easier than Western journalists would be.

However, being from Eastern Europe is not only an advantage. Some interviewees said that they had more a difficult time gaining access to the frontline areas and were afforded fewer opportunities to interview high-ranking people than Western journalists. The Romanian correspondent (E) described how surprised a CNN team was that he was reporting without a team of local security forces. The correspondents interviewed often worked with less experienced local fixers because they could not afford to hire the more experienced ones. A Hungarian journalist (G) divided the local forces in Ukraine into two categories: first-class and second-class fixers:

> If you are a fixer and doing it for the 10th year, working with international media, it's incomparable to those fixers who have been doing it for a year since the war started. So those fixers who have been doing this since 2014 are now working for the biggest outlets, for CNN, *New York Times*, for major Western outlets. And we, average guys from small media from Central-Eastern Europe, can only have those who started this job now.

The leading international media would also have easier access to Ukrainian authorities. A Hungarian journalist (K) spoke of unequal treatment and of Ukrainian officials preferring to support Western media, which have more reach than Central and Eastern European media.

Discussion

We investigated how Central and Eastern European foreign correspondents describe the influences on their reporting on the war in Ukraine and how they perceive their role as mediators between the events in Ukraine and their audiences at home. From the perspective of these journalists, war reporting is essential due to the geographical and cultural proximity of their countries to the theater of war in Ukraine. The results of the study indicate that the journalists experienced influences on their work on several levels: Their individual background had an impact on their journalistic work, as did working with fixers, the limited opportunities to obtain information on the ground, the expectations of their employers at home in terms of good stories, and the political situation in their home country.

As far as the war correspondents' *individual* beliefs, values and prejudices are concerned, we found that, on the one hand, they endeavored to remain objective, to separate facts from opinions and to report in as politically balanced a manner as possible. This attitude reflects the high value placed on objective journalistic reporting worldwide (MUÑOZ-TORRES 2012). On the other hand, journalists are rooted in their home countries. They also have close historical and cultural ties with Ukraine, which is why the interviewees want Ukraine to win. They are members of an international professional community as well as of a national community of values (ZANDBERG/NEIGER 2005). This tension was evident in the decision-making processes, for example in the selection of stories. Some journalists admitted to reporting in a pro-Ukrainian manner and deliberately drawing the attention of the domestic audience to the situation in Ukraine and the danger to their own country. This also shows how objectivity may be called into question when reporters distance themselves from their home editorial offices (SCHUDSON 2001: 163).

The *routines* of the correspondents covering Ukraine are in line with professional rules, norms and procedures of journalism (REESE/SHOEMAKER 2018). These correspondents, however, displayed a lack of trust in the local media in Ukraine as they considered the local media reporting to be biased. The journalistic rules of information gathering and verification were challenged by propaganda from both the Ukrainian and Russian sides. The correspondents interviewed from Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary also doubted the credibility of reports from international media, as there had been cases in which journalists working for foreign media had been taken in by Ukrainian propaganda. In contrast, the Telegram app was considered to be an important source, even if the information was perhaps not correct, as both Ukrainian and Russian authorities used it to provide direct information about the latest developments. Ukrainian fixers were another important source of information. Nevertheless, some of the interviewees

were skeptical about the fixers. The Hungarian journalists described them as »biased« and »patriots«. Previous research has indicated that correspondents are aware of the danger that fixers are pursuing their own agenda and may not be trustworthy (PALMER/FONTAN 2007; MURRELL 2014).

At the organizational level, the corporate policy of the media companies who sent journalists to cover the war in Ukraine influenced how the correspondents collected and edited news. Smaller media outlets reported more personal stories, eyewitness accounts and documentaries, also to avoid propagandistic tones. Larger media companies, especially Bulgarian and Romanian ones, relied on live reporting, also to show that they have correspondents on the ground. Such a decision on an organizational level is a consequence of the special circumstances of news production in wartime (REESE/SHOEMAKER 2018). *On an extra-media level*, the correspondents also experienced propaganda from official Ukrainian authorities. They were asked to report on the victories of the Ukrainian armed forces or on Russian massacres and violence against the Ukrainian civilian population. In some places, the correspondents had to accept restrictions as the Ukrainian authorities feared that sensitive information would otherwise be leaked to the Russians.

At the level of *social systems*, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary are countries that were under Soviet influence until 1989 and managed the transition to democracy in the 1990s. With the war against Ukraine, Russia's influence on these countries is growing again. Correspondents from Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary worked against this by addressing the Russian aggression against Ukraine. In Hungary, pro-Russian reports are much more common, especially as most media companies are owned by followers of Victor Orbán, who publicly expresses his support for Russian President Vladimir Putin (MILOJEVIĆ/KRSTIĆ 2018). The cultural proximity between the countries in the region makes it easier for correspondents to identify with the Ukrainian population and produce both informative and emotional reports.

An information war is taking place between Ukraine and Russia, and the correspondents interviewed were confronted with disinformation and propaganda from both sides. They saw Ukrainian authorities as only partially credible sources of information and were sometimes skeptical of local Ukrainian fixers. Above all, they were torn between their personal convictions and the need to adhere to journalistic standards. Their reporting is of great importance because Russian influence on public opinion is increasing in countries such as Hungary and Bulgaria.

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Appendix

Table 1
Research sample

	Journalist	Gender	Country	Type of media organization	Experience
1.	A	Woman	Bulgaria	Private	Reporter, 7 years
2.	B	Man	Bulgaria	Public	Reporter, 10 years
3.	C	Man	Bulgaria	Private	Videographer, 24 years
4.	D	Man	Bulgaria	Private	Reporter, 10 years
5.	E	Man	Romania	Public	Videographer, 24 years
6.	F	Man	Romania	Private	Reporter, 22 years
7.	G	Man	Romania	Public	Reporter, 14 years
8.	H	Man	Hungary	Private	Reporter, 15 years
9.	I	Man	Hungary	Private	Reporter, 14 years
10.	G	Man	Hungary	Private	Reporter, 24 years
11.	K	Man	Hungary	Private	Reporter, 25 years