

# **Towards a network of progressive media in East-Central Europe**

An internationalist collective endeavour in times of rising instability: the Eastern European Left Media Network

Wednesday 28 April 2021, by [East European Left Media Outlet Post date](#) (Date first published: 2 April 2021).

**How much do we Eastern Europeans know about each other? What kind of information can we acquire about each others' local context? Where is this information produced, in what language and based on what political views and underlying ideologies?**

In 2019 representatives of our media organizations gathered in Budapest to discuss the possibilities of creating an Eastern European media network which would assist in providing news and analysis about relevant events and processes in our particular countries, and about the region in general.

What led us to this initiative was the search for answers to the questions above. We have very limited access to news and analyses regarding Eastern European contexts, and the majority of sources are foreign to our region.

We have agreed upon cooperation big and small, the former remaining to be realized in the years to come, the latter being small steps which will pave the way to our goal, which is to secure a stable and timely flow of information and analyses about Eastern European affairs, produced by Eastern European media, and made available to the public on as many of the myriad of our languages as possible.

The pandemic made us postpone the second meeting of the network which would have allowed us to meet in person new members who have joined during the year, so instead we organized – you've guessed it – an online discussion. Even though everyone is fed up with the online format, and for good reasons, it does have the merit of providing the opportunity to meet with a much wider audience. Hence, we have chosen to discuss among ourselves and with the interested public a number of questions related to leftist media and its experiences during this pandemic burdened year.

So, who are “we” exactly? We are currently 19 media outlets all positioned on the left side of the political spectrum, laying the foundations for an Eastern European left media network which aims at long term and substantial collaborations.

What follows is a snapshot of our discussion which you can also watch in its entirety via this link. The panelists are representatives of a part of the network's membership.

## **Covid-19, journalism, activism**

The media outlets represented in the discussion differ from one another in many ways. The divergence in terms of staff size, financing, geographical scope, involvement in non-media activities are closely related to the challenges these leftist media organizations face during the pandemic and

the actions, activities and editorial decisions they undertake.

“We have managed to organize the work of our collectives from our homes in an effective and productive way” said Maria Cernat from [The Barricade](#), which operates in Bulgaria and Romania, while discussing the experience of working during the first wave of the pandemic, “But a number of difficulties nevertheless arose. A lot of investigative work and reporting had to be postponed, and we have also encountered financial difficulties.”

Alongside financial difficulties, journalists share the experience of overworking themselves during the months of the pandemic. But, their commitment to serious reporting on Covid-19, reliance on science, critique of conspiracy theories, dedication to voice the social and economic dimensions of the growing crisis and its impact on the lives of ordinary people, brought also a rise in readership size as well as trust in their media.

“When the lockdown started, there was a huge increase in readership”, said Jan Bělíček from [Alarm](#) based in the Czech Republic. As a result of their serious approach to reporting on the pandemic, doctors and scientists started approaching Alarm to publish their work in a media space they recognized as reliable.

Historic moments of crisis such as the one caused by the spread of SARS-CoV-2 pose a challenge for proper analyses, as it was highlighted during the discussion by [Bilten](#)’s Marko Kostanić:

“We were trying to address how politics and economics change due to the pandemic, how the left reacts, how the so-called center and the right reacts, and there were some very specific and bizarre ideological combinations in these circumstances.”

The Croatian media organization described its role during the pandemic as providing left oriented doctors and political actors with analyses and arguments to challenge the right wing governments’ policies and wider right wing propaganda such as conspiracy theories.

[A Szem](#), a Hungarian language outlet based in Romania, oriented toward culture and social critique, and running mostly on the fuel of enthusiasm (aka non-paid labour), saw their role during the pandemic as being that of knowledge production and support for activists.

“We were publishing articles which were analyzing the current crisis as a capitalist crisis. A Szem also has a section for promoting activist organizations, solidarity causes, cultural events, where we give space to our comrades from Romania and abroad and translate information about their causes to Hungarian”, explained the A Szem’s Nóra Ugron.

A trait leftist media outlets share is the importance they give to the activities of progressive social and economic actors, such as trade unions, social movements, different NGO’s, cooperatives or activists. It is not uncommon that leftist journalists are also activists themselves.

“We have collaborated mostly with trade unions around centres for the elderly, which were facing issues that have not been treated for a long time and the pandemic magnified them. We have also collaborated with unions in factories”, said Jan Bělíček from Alarm.

In the Czech Republic the economic consequences of the pandemic led to a noticeable upsurge in the number of people seeking jobs within the gig economy. Just as in other countries, this translates to a fall of job security, or in other words, to a drop in living standards. The challenges to protecting the interests of labourers posed by the swiftly growing gig economy remains largely unaddressed by legislature and trade union practices. Alarm is among the organizations which are looking forward to cooperate with trade unions on working out legislative approaches to reduce the level of

vulnerability of workers in the gig economy, which is characterized by high levels of uncertainty for workers.

The lives of people – mostly women – doing care work have never been characterized by ease and economic prosperity, but the pandemic in combination with the downsizing of public services imposed hardships which affect all life's aspect – from the financial all the way to the physical and psychological wellbeing.

Although care work is substantial for our everyday lives, it is among the practices which often remain invisible for the lens of mainstream media, policymakers and the like.

During the pandemic members of the LeftEast editorial have organized a number of webinars, giving priority to the topic of care work, with the endeavour to bring more workers' voices themselves into the discussion. On their media platform they have addressed related topics of housing, debt, and labour migration. Being a trans-national leftist platform, LeftEast continued to provide space for struggles of leftists in many countries:

“We do not have one national audience and we are not speaking about a specific national government. Rather, we are trying to hold the space for comrades from different political ideologies and tendencies on the left to speak about their own struggles, and our editors try to engage deeply with the authors' texts” explained LeftEast's Mariya Ivancheva.

The year has been exhausting for the team behind [Gazeta de Artă Politică](#) based in Romania, but their strengths were required less behind the laptop keyboard and in their quarantine home offices, and more on the battlefield of the housing movement, as the crisis ignited by Covid-19 has quickly spread towards the homes of many via rising unemployment and the inability to pay bank loans and rents. Hence, housing also became a terrain where these activists collaborated with trade unions.

During 2020 one of the most important tactics of the housing movement in Romania was to create alliances with other movements, commented Veda Popovici from the Gazeta:

“With the block for housing we have done important work to create an intersection between housing and labour regarding recommendations, policies and practices of organising (1:31)

This is really quintessential. It reflects the local movements' understanding of how they can get empowered during the crisis”

Publishing regularly about the issues in the countries of the region can build solidarity and knowledge

Be it money or additional human labour, no organisation has anything near to what could be called an abundance of resources. Does it then make sense to build a trans-national network of many diverging organizations? Although, the panellists agree that a network that brings together leftist media is needed, they restrain their hopes from flying too high.

“The perfect situation in the future would be to have regular contact and exchange of suiting materials. The challenge before us is to learn how to use our resources and our knowledge to make this happen”, said Agnieszka Wiśniewska from [Krytyka Polityczna](#), Poland based media outlet, publisher and cultural organization.

According to Wiśniewska, knowledge sharing and partnerships, in other words practices that can be realized within a network, are essential for leftist media in order to become major players in the media realm. Still, as shown during the first year of the Eastern European media network, such efforts can be hindered by the limits in the capacities of member organizations, as well as by the

simple fact of the multitude of Eastern Europe's local contexts and languages. Hence, it is necessary to secure the resources for keeping staff which can coordinate and mediate within the network.

The Slovakian monthly [Kapitál](#)'s Tomáš Hučko reflected on the threads of cooperation that the network's founding members agreed upon during their first meeting in Budapest in 2019. Hučko noted that although a number of people invested efforts into realizing the plans that were made, the pandemic has disrupted and slowed down the process of development.

Although joint research projects and developing a news agency, which are the most ambitious plans, remain to be tackled in the future, the labour put into the network did produce results, in forms of exchange regarding expertise on specific topics, translations of each other's texts, and knowledge sharing. During the discussion Hučko pointed to advantages which are evident even in the current rudimentary phase of the media network:

"One advantage is emotional: seeing that other people in other countries face the same struggles, that you are not alone. Another one is the possibility to get the know-how of other media who are dealing with a similar situation which is or will be present in our local context. A recent example is following Krytyka Polityczna's reporting on and engagement with Strajk Kobiet."

Mainstream media is saving its resources on covering foreign affairs, especially when regarding countries like those of Eastern Europe. Securing a steady flow of information among the network's member organizations about topics that are relevant from a left point of view is already a strong reason for the existence of the Eastern European Left Media Outlet, stated Marko Miletić representing the Serbian platform [Mašina](#).

In Miletić's view left media should aspire to its traditional role of informing, educating and organizing the working class, and the network of media organizations is a precious recourse for fulfilling the international dimension of such endeavours.

"For example, one of the most read articles on our website is about Serbian workers in Slovakia. The reason behind this is that many people have to take up work abroad, and people are educating themselves through the materials available to them."

Publishing regularly about the issues in the countries of the region can build solidarity as well as knowledge, explained Orsi Pósfai from the Hungarian platform [Mérce](#). Such writing can be motivational for activists, movements and aspiring politicians.

Mérce publishes news, opinion and analyses and Pósfai regards the building of an Eastern European news agency as the most promising goal - and the most difficult one to achieve.

"I would like the network to move forward with the project which is probably the most difficult, the press agency. The press agency would provide certainty regarding information and sources. And also it would give us the possibility to write about events in each other's countries without relying on the lens of Western media."

A lot of the stories [Platzforma](#) publishes are of a regional, if not global character, pointed out Vitalie Sprinceana representing the Moldavian organization; hence, the need for a transnational network comes almost naturally.

"Most of the international initiatives somehow go through Western Europe and we sometimes lose our specific regional topics. For us this network can provide more possibilities to follow regional stories, to see how others in the region deal with challenges similar to those we are facing, to expand range of vision and action."

In a sense, the network developing between the Eastern European leftist media outlets seems natural, since a lot of the founding organizations or its members have met and collaborated during the past. The membership grew during 2020 and new contacts still remain to be made. The fundamental challenge that lies ahead is the sustainability of such a transnational cooperation.

“Despite our prior knowledge about each other, I think that this is the first attempt to build something stable, that would last for a longer period of time, which is a difficult task. I’m very optimistic about the network, and self-sustainability is something to aim for in the long run” concluded Sprinceana.

---

## **East European Left Media Outlet**

[Click here](#) to subscribe to *ESSF* newsletters in English and/or French.

---

## **P.S.**

**Note from LeftEast editors:** This article [first appeared in the Serbian portal Mašina](#). It summarizes the meeting of the newly established Eastern European Left Media Outlet (ELMO)