



Baltic Centre for  
Media Excellence

Annual Report 2016

## Setting off the long-awaited change

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The Baltic Centre for Media Excellence (BCME) is an independent non-profit organization, founded in November 2015 in Riga, Latvia. Born out of a grassroots initiative by the Baltic journalistic community, BCME has grown into a powerful hub for smart journalism in the Baltics and beyond.

BCME focuses on the needs of independent media outlets in the region and provides them with hands-on vocational training and mentorship in journalism and media management, essential media market research and audience analysis.

To ensure the long-term sustainability of independent media, BCME also works with the general public, promoting media literacy and critical thinking, especially among groups most vulnerable to disinformation and propaganda messages, civic awareness and demand for quality journalism.

This report covers the activities of the BCME in all of these core directions during 2016. The latest information about BCME projects is available on the Centre's website — [baltic.media](http://baltic.media).

Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Foreign Minister of the Federal Republic of Germany meets the Executive Director of the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence Rita Ruduša and Chairman of the Board of LTV Ivars Belte in Riga in 2016. Germany supported one of the biggest BCME media training projects in 2016, implemented in collaboration with Deutsche Welle. Photo credit: LTV



## Message from the Executive Director

This report marks our first full year of working towards the goals set by the founders of BCME. Building trust-based relationships with the independent media in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and beyond, and exploring their strengths and challenges was our main task in 2016, going hand-in-hand with making a strong public case for the role and value of quality journalism.

The growth of our operating capacity during our first year was beyond all expectations. We have established prolific partnerships with the leading media development organizations and journalist unions in the region and globally, and have succeeded in attracting substantial funding for our initiatives. Together with our partners we have carefully mapped the vocational training needs of independent media journalists and managers across the Baltics and the Eastern Partnership countries — for the first time in the post-Soviet history of these countries. We have also started to fulfil these needs with our elaborate and highly customisable hands-on training and mentorship programmes. We have attracted internationally-renowned professionals as our trainers.

During 2016 we focused on those who have been most deprived of quality vocational training during the last few decades — hyperlocal independent media and public service broadcasters. Our aim is to empower them with knowledge, skills and also inspiration to meet the financial, political and technological challenges they face on an everyday basis. Personalized and fine-tuned training sessions, as well as embedded mentorships, have proven to be most effective in advancing this vital change.

In its first year, BCME also worked hard in bringing the Baltic media communities into the global conversation about contemporary challenges for quality journalism. Be it a discussion about the concept of constructive news with the Head of News of Danish Broadcasting Corporation, Ulrik Haagerup, or a conversation about the challenges of covering the US presidential campaign with the Editor-in-Chief of BuzzFeed Ben Smith, BCME has been at the forefront of providing media professionals and the general public access to the influential thinkers in contemporary global journalism.

We have also become the leading hub of media literacy initiatives for different segments of the public in the Baltics. In 2016 we focused on reaching the young generation by addressing high-school students and their teachers. This is a long-term investment, the effects of which will take years to manifest in full, yet we see it as a crucial condition for a healthy media landscape and vigorous civic society in all of the countries we operate in.

Despite being active for just one year, BCME has gained a strong presence and reputation both with international media development organizations and local journalistic communities. Being perceived as the embodiment of a long-awaited change is an enormous responsibility, and this is what drives us into new undertakings for smarter journalism, stronger independent media and an improved life for each and every member of our society.

Rita Ruduša, Executive Director of the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence. Photo credit: Ģirts Raģelis

Rita Ruduša



## Opportunities and risks for independent media in the Baltics and the countries of the Eastern Partnership

The BCME occupies a unique position in the community of international media development organizations. Between its core team and community of founders, it combines decades of expertise in quality journalism and education, and first-hand experience of democratic reforms, including those of the public service media. The Centre possesses local and regional cultural fluency, as well as trust among media professionals across the Baltics and beyond. This also allows the Centre to appreciate fully the specific conditions of independent media in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and the Eastern Partnership countries, and facilitate change according to the best practices of the media industry.

In Ukraine, the media are still being used as weapons in the information war, while journalists are getting killed on the actual front line. The heavy presence of local oligarchs in the media market adds to the pressures in Ukraine. The situation is better in Georgia with its strong journalism education, higher level of press freedom and outspoken media NGOs.

Our geographical area of responsibility has a highly diverse media landscape. The Baltic states feature high in the rankings of press freedom, have strong public broadcasters, and standard-setting investigative journalism, exemplified by the activities of RE:Baltica, the Baltic Investigative Journalism Centre. However, political pressures on the media persist and the best conditions for the development of regional media are lacking in Estonia and Latvia, owing to unfair competition from poorly-regulated bulletins, disguised as newspapers, which are owned and controlled by local municipalities. Additionally, all three countries are heavily exposed to disinformation — the Kremlin-controlled Russian media platforms maintain the government line and frequently employ biased or even outright falsified information to deliver the message. The re-transmitted Russian television channels, which are freely available in the Baltics via cable, enjoy large audiences. The propaganda messages reach audiences via online platforms and social media, too, in all languages spoken in the region. Still, the general conditions for strengthening quality journalism in the Baltics are favourable — journalists can work freely and safely and rely on the rule of law.

At the other end of the press freedom scale is Azerbaijan, once dubbed “Europe’s biggest prison for news providers” by Reporters Without Borders. It is still one of the most dangerous places for independent journalists to work. In Belarus independent media are squeezed to the margins of public life by state-controlled press and censorship. In both countries independent journalists often have no other choice but to pursue their work in exile.

While diverse, the Eastern Partnership countries share common problematic traits: relatively high levels of corruption, vulnerability to disinformation and propaganda, underfunded (or non-existent) public media, as well as low citizen purchasing power and low demand for quality journalism. Across the region, media monopolies prevail at a national level, controlled either by the state or large private holdings, resulting in varying levels of editorial politicization. Regional media struggle financially. They lack the capacity to commission or conduct robust audience research, which would enable them to produce healthier business models, leading to sustainability and greater independence.

These countries also share challenges known to the media in Europe and other developed countries — the ongoing decline of the print, radio

and television advertising market since the global financial crisis in 2008 and along with it the traditional models of financing for independent journalism. The challenge of keeping up with digitalization, as well as with the ever-changing preferences and habits of media users is an issue for journalists in European and post-Socialist countries alike. The proliferation of fake news is confronting the media all around the world, stressing the need to enhance media literacy and critical information analysis skills among consumers of traditional, as well as social media.

The BCME has set itself an ambitious goal — to empower the independent media of the Baltics and the Eastern Partnership countries to meet all of these challenges. With carefully tailored training programmes for journalists, as well as individual mentorship programs for newsrooms and a media literacy advancement plan aimed at their audiences, the Centre is on its way to achieving our common aims.

We are certain about the change-enhancing power of carefully tailored and skilfully executed training sessions and professional recommendations, based on the vast experience of our trainers and their deep understanding of the newsrooms they work with.

In our 2016 vocational training programmes, we focused on three main groups which, according to our data, have received the least professional education opportunities in recent years: regional and local media, public media and Russian-language media in the Baltics. We surveyed journalists and managers of these media to map and analyse their real-life needs. We attracted world-renowned professionals, immensely diverse in their backgrounds and expertise, as our trainers to provide the media with the precise knowledge, skills and inspiration they need to keep their work up-to-date and in line with the industry best practice.

We also completed our first in-depth mentorship programme for newsrooms. Dmitri Surnin, one of our leading trainers, conducted it in the editorial office of regional newspaper “Kurzemes vārds” (Kurzeme region, Latvia). As the programme proved to be highly effective in providing hands-on expertise for improved decision-making of editorial choices, management and business planning, we are looking for possibilities to provide this kind of embedded mentorship and extended consultancy to more independent media outlets across the region.

*We are only beginners in data journalism, and we are eager to learn, because presenting statistics in an interesting and comprehensible way is really necessary nowadays. We have already started to use the tips we learned at the seminar to make our newspaper more beautiful, attractive and informative.*

Antra Ērgle, journalist from regional newspaper “Bauskas Dzīve”, after the “Data journalism” seminar

### The year in numbers

35 seminars given by 14 trainers in 10 cities to 114 journalists and media managers from 5 countries.

### Main subjects

In 2016 we covered a broad range of subjects: storytelling skills, interview techniques, newspaper design, multimedia reporting, photo journalism skills, implementing “constructive news” approach, developing a digital business strategy, data journalism and visualization. Among these, subjects related to multimedia reporting, data journalism and understanding of media-use in the digital age have proven to be the most urgent among our target audience.

### Training snapshot

Workshop on Digital Business Strategy with Mette Rosendahl, head of the strategic and development department at the online media portal Altin- get, Denmark.

The workshop covers all aspects of digital income strategy: determining target groups, creating subscriptions and paywalls, disseminating newsletters, controlling traffic, using social media in content promotion etc.

SWOT-analysis and strategizing is provided to all of the participating



media. Individual strategic plans include both short- and long-term solutions, as well as suggestions for immediate possible adjustments within an organization's available resources. Participants: Four regional newspapers from the Kurzeme and Zemgale regions.

### Our trainers

**Dmitri Surnin,**

Media consultant, principal strategic adviser for the BCME Eastern Partnership Programme, former editor-in-chief of "Moi Raion" newspaper (Russia/Lithuania)

**Zoya Trunova,**

Freelance media consultant and trainer, formerly head of the BBC World Service Global Video Unit (UK)

**Ieva Lešinska,**

Writer, editor and translator, contributor to magazine "Rīgas Laiks" (Latvia)

**Ivars Āboliņš,**

Freelance writer, contributor to magazine "Klubs", former commissioning editor at LTV (Latvia)

**Casper Walbum Høst,**

News editor at DR (Denmark)

**Mette Rosendahl,**

Head of the strategic and development department at the digital media portal Altinget (Denmark)

**Nika Aleksejeva,**

Data literacy trainer, School of Data fellow (Latvia)

**Inga Sprinģe,**

Executive director of The Baltic Centre for Investigative Journalism RE: Baltica (Latvia)

**Kevin Bishop,**

Freelance media consultant and trainer, formerly BBC news producer (UK)

**Claus Vittus,**

Radio presenter and producer, DR (Denmark)

**Tira Shubart,**

Journalist and media trainer, formerly news producer at BBC, NBC and CBC (UK)

**Jacob Fenger,**

Producer at Nordisk Film (Denmark)

**Ulrik Haagerup,**

Head of News, DR (Denmark)

**Evgeny Gladin,**

Freelance photographer (Russia)

Kevin Bishop, freelance media consultant and trainer, formerly BBC news producer, leading a storytelling seminar to the local media of Kurzeme region in Latvia. Skrunda, 2016. Photo credit: Alans Perševičs

The research projects we conducted in 2016 were aimed at assessing the educational and training needs of various media so that the BCME can meet those specific needs by developing customized seminars and mentorship sessions. We have used both qualitative and quantitative research methods to gather the detailed data necessary to adjust our existing seminars and mentorship projects, as well as to create new ones in the future.

#### In 2016 we conducted three research projects:

##### Mapping the Training Needs of Regional and Local Media in the Baltics

This qualitative research was executed as a series of in-depth interviews with journalists and managers of regional and local media in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. Overall 14 interviews with editors and media managers were conducted by a team of 2 researchers.

##### Key findings and conclusions:

Advancement of digital skills, as well as storytelling and visual journalism skills proved to be among the most pressing needs for local and regional media in the Baltics. The findings were put at the core of the BCME vocational training programme.

*Without the research we have done in 2016, it would be impossible to understand the concrete everyday challenges of media, which is what we are trying to address. It was also a good reality-check that allowed us to assess the scope of necessary investment into strengthening independent journalism in the Baltics and Eastern Partnership countries, both content- and business-wise.*

Rita Ruduša, Executive director of BCME

##### Gap-Asset Analysis of Russian Language Media Skill Set in the Eastern Partnership

Six-country research with a united multi-level methodology, including interviews with journalists and media managers, academics, and media NGOs, desk research of existing literature, analysis of quantitative data on the country's economy, demographics, size of the media and advertising market, and the level of media freedom as well as qualitative assessments from local experts. The case study of each country was carried out by local researchers with a track record of media research and expertise recognised in the domestic and international media community.

##### Key findings and conclusions:

Across the region, regional and local media struggle financially due to the stagnant or sinking advertising markets and lack of advertising sales skills of the staff. The absence of good-quality audience research does not allow for middle- and long-term strategic business planning. The media studied are characterized by underdevelopment of such areas of journalism as investigative journalism and conflict reporting. Only a coordinated and targeted effort by the donor community can help journalists and managers of independent media in the region to access the knowledge necessary to fill the obstructive gaps.

##### Baltic Media Healthcheck

Overview of the financial situation and sustainability of both publicly and privately owned national, regional and local media in the Baltics.

##### Key findings and conclusions:

The last decade for the Baltic media industry is characterized by falling audience numbers and advertising revenues in addition to changing news user habits. To tackle these challenges, media companies in the Baltics

appear to seek greater consolidation, creation of transnational businesses and diversification of media types and platforms. Problematic monetization of news outlets' digital presence, as well as the lack of multimedia reporting and digital communication skills are still among the biggest risks for long-term financial stability and growth for Baltic media organizations.

### The year in numbers

3 research projects by 10 authors in 9 countries

### Our researchers

Researchers we have been collaborating with are Arif Aliev (Azerbaijan), Pavel Bykovski (Belarus), Nino Danelia (Georgia), Victor Gotisan (Moldova), Boris Navasardian (Armenia), Roman Shutov (Ukraine), Aija Krūtaine (Latvia), Evita Puriņa (Latvia), Urmas Loit (Estonia), Rytas Staselis (Lithuania).



The capacity of critical consumption and creation of media has become an essential skill of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, equally important for children and adult decision-makers alike. The BCME's media literacy programmes are aimed at advancing a deeper understanding of complex media messages, strengthening analytical skills and ability for critical assessment of information sources, as well as developing a stronger immunity towards disinformation, fake news and populism.

### Main target audiences of 2016:

#### Journalists

Journalists and media editors are considered to be media literate by default. However, they too need regular practice and development of their skills in source analysis, fact verification and data literacy, especially when disinformation and propaganda risks are high. For this reason, we have included media literacy topics in our vocational training sessions, paying special attention to providing training to Russian-language media.

#### Educators

By providing media literacy training to teachers, the BCME is aiming to develop a network of media literacy ambassadors equipped with the knowledge and tools to help their students become competent media consumers.

#### High-school students

As most young people of high-school age are already active media producers via their social media profiles, vlogs or blogs, the BCME provides them with knowledge and skills, as well as inspiration, for more conscious and critical media-creation activities. The Centre utilizes the 'learning by doing' approach, offering students the opportunity to create journalistic materials together with experienced media professionals.

#### General public

Fake news, propaganda and disinformation have become one of the greatest concerns for the development and sustainability of democracies around the world. The ability to critically choose, understand and compare various media messages lies at the core of fully-fledged civic participation, and sound political and economic decision-making. The BCME facilitates these skills by promoting and explaining the main principles of critical media consumption, using various media and utilizing a comprehensive and attractive approach.

### Sub-Programmes and Projects of 2016

#### Assessment of media literacy skills of teachers

To develop an effective media literacy training programme for high-school teachers, the BCME conducted a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews with teachers in Riga and parts of Latvia. Expert interviews, as well as thorough literature study and best practice analysis were also included in the research.

The Centre is also actively encouraging citizens of all ages and backgrounds to engage in their own media creation, providing them with the necessary skills and knowledge, and offering possibilities to learn by doing, working in close collaboration with experienced media professionals.

Ben Smith, editor-in-chief of BuzzFeed, taking part in the BCME public discussion "Living with Trump" at the Conversation Festival LAMPA. Cesis, 2016. Photo credit: Alfrēds Ulmanis

### Media literacy workshops for school teachers and principals

8 workshops were held between October 24th and December 1st 2016 in Ventspils and Liepaja (Kurzeme region), Riga (capital), Daugavpils and Svente (Latgale region). Altogether 59 educators participated in workshops, including 2 school principals, 10 deputy principals, 45 teachers, 1 librarian and 1 school psychologist.

### Preparation of media literacy kits for teachers

On the basis of the Centre's research, expert recommendations and examples of good practice, the BCME created 60 media literacy kits that were presented to the teachers who were participants in the media literacy workshops. The kits contained selected video materials, a list of useful links and other helpful materials to facilitate the inclusion of media literacy in the high-school curriculum.

*The media literacy workshop was a very inspiring and thought-provoking event. It helped me find another viewpoint to understand the complexities of the modern world we live in. Teachers definitely need media literacy training, both for their professional work and for personal development.*

Valda More, Deputy director of Friendly Appeal Liepaja Secondary School N°5

### Pilna doma (formerly known as Media Games)

Currently, media literacy is not included in the official high-school curriculum in Latvia, despite the apparent need for critical consumption of social and traditional media. "Pilna doma" aims at advancing critical thinking, fact-checking and analytical skills among high-school students and their teachers.

The project encompasses three interconnected activities:

Six video lectures, where respected and popular Latvian journalists describe various genres of journalism and deliver accessible tips on critical assessment of the quality of media information; three seminars for high-school teachers from Latvian-language and minority schools in Riga, Daugavpils and Liepaja, focusing on practical implementation of media literacy skills in the curriculum; competition of student-made media products to inspire creation of competent, critical, public interest content among high-school students (to be held in 2017).

### The year in numbers

11 seminars for 159 teachers and preparation of competition for 150 high-school students.

Independent media are built upon the demand from their audience for quality journalism, as well as shared democratic values and understanding of journalism as a community service for enhancing positive change. To educate the wider public about the vital role independent media play in their political, economic and social wellbeing, the BCME has turned to a variety of channels and modes of communication.

#### Informing through the website

In 2016, the BCME created a comprehensive and multilingual website ([baltic.media](http://baltic.media)) that not only informs the public about the operations of the Centre itself, but also provides them with a deeper understanding of different media landscapes around the world, as well as valuable insights and convenient tips for creating media content from leading international media trainers and journalists. The Centre's website is available in Latvian, Russian and English, and in 2017 the BCME plans to expand its reach even further, adding Lithuanian and Estonian versions.

#### Motivating to be critical

The BCME-organized public discussion, "Living with Trump", was one of the most attended events at the Conversation Festival LAMPA, visited by a total of 9,000 people. The discussion featured the editor-in-chief of the American internet media company BuzzFeed, Ben Smith, who is listed among the 100 Most Creative People in Business by business media brand "Fast Company". The discussion provided the public with a unique opportunity to join the global debate on the emerging journalistic challenges of the "post-truth" era.

#### Inspiring though action

As one of the aims of the BCME is to foster public discussion about the quality of media and, in particular, of coverage of sensitive topics, including those having historical significance, in 2016 the Centre joined efforts with the internationally renowned Žanis Lipke Memorial to organize "Rumbula-75" — a series of public commemorative events for the Rumbula massacre of 1941 near Riga. "Rumbula-75" included a ceremony by the Freedom Monument dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust, as well as publication of an open letter, signed by 300 people, including leading Latvian public intellectuals. BCME also organized a public discussion examining social discourses and media coverage of the Holocaust in Latvia. The initiative received substantial media attention both in Latvia and beyond, further promoting the core values of the BCME.

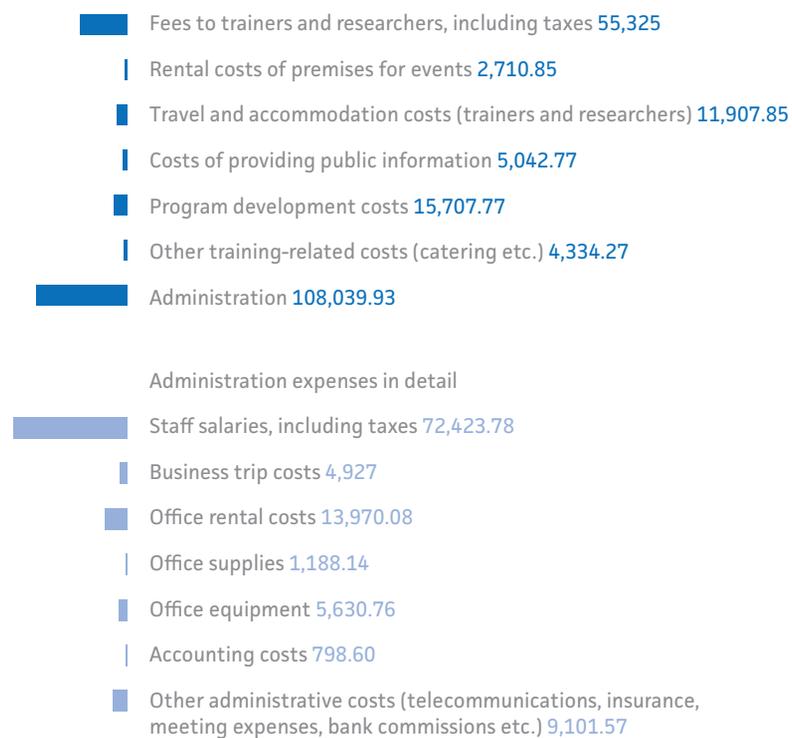
The BCME is grateful to its generous donors. All of the received funds were allocated to achieve the established goals of the BCME, ensuring effective spending, as well as full transparency to our donors and partners.

### Main positions of the BCME budget in 2016, in EURO

#### Income



#### Expenses



#### Our donors:

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia  
 The Nordic Council of Ministers' Office in Latvia  
 The Danish Cultural Institute in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania  
 The European Endowment for Democracy  
 The Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany  
 The Stockholm School of Economics in Riga  
 The United States Embassy in Latvia  
 The British Council (grant for 2017)

In 2017 the BCME is aiming to expand its operations across all areas of responsibility:

#### **In Vocational Training and Mentorship for Journalists and Media Managers**

Intensifying training for independent regional and nationwide media in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia to maximize their professional resources and impact on critical audience decision making before the local elections in 2017.

Development of comprehensive vocational training programmes for independent Russian-language media in the Eastern Partnership countries, based on the findings of the respective study, conducted by the BCME in 2016.

Expanding the Centre's embedded mentorship programme for financially struggling independent media across the Baltics.

#### **In Media Market Research and Audience Analysis**

The second stage of "Gap-Asset Analysis of Russian Language Media Skill Set in the Eastern Partnership" — presenting and discussing the results of the first stage of the research, follow-up of the surveyed media, expanding the study to investigate the training needs of independent media of the region working in languages other than Russian.

Creation of the 2017 edition of "Baltic Media Healthcheck", focusing on possibilities for developing sustainable business models for independent media outlets in the Baltics.

Initiating in-depth audience research in regard to the impact of fake news and disinformation on audience trust in media (title to be announced).

#### **In Advancing Media Literacy and Critical Thinking**

Further development of Pilna doma project is one of our top priorities in 2017. This includes adding new educational content to the project's website pilnadoma.lv, as well as promoting the project through viral posts and videos on social media and organizing the award ceremony for the winners of the best student-made media competition (to be held at the National Library of Latvia).

#### **In Promoting Civic Awareness and Demand for Quality Journalism**

Broadening the reach of media literacy initiatives to the general public, including wider sets of formats and channels to stress the importance of critical media consumption.

Developing an internship programme at the BCME to increase the recognition of the Centre's values and goals, as well as advancing NGO management skills and civic awareness among the participants of the programme.

## Organization and Contacts

### BCME staff

**Rita Ruduša**  
Executive director

**Beatricia Revenco**  
Eastern Partnership project manager

**Signe Valtīņa**  
Project manager in the Baltics

**Antonija Skopa-Šlāpina**  
Office manager

**Diāna Hoduļina**  
Eastern Partnership programme assistant

**Magda Walter**  
Principal development adviser

### BCME board

**Anda Rožukalne**  
Chair of the board, head of Journalism Study Programme at Riga Stradins University (Latvia)

**Sanita Jemberga**  
Director of Re: Baltica Investigative Journalism Centre (Latvia)

**Andres Joesaar**  
Vice-rector for creative activities and cooperation, Tallinn University and head of Media Research at the Estonian Public Broadcaster ERR (Estonia)

**Mart Raudsaar**  
Managing director of the Estonian Publishers Association, lecturer at the University of Tartu (Estonia)

**Jolanta Tarasavičiene**  
Head of international relations, the Lithuanian Public Broadcaster LRT (Lithuania)

**Aiste Žilinskiene**  
Head of the Lithuanian Online Media Association (Lithuania)

### BCME partners

Institute for War and Peace Reporting

IREX Europe

Transitions Online

BBC Media Action

DW Akademie

Norwegian Institute of Journalism

Independent Journalism Centre of Moldova

European Federation of Journalists

Centre for Media Studies, Stockholm School of Economics in Riga

Thompson Foundation

### Contacts

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