



## Annual Report 2020

# A year that will be remembered

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Committed to creating resilient, inclusive and tech-savvy media, and knowledgeable and inquisitive audiences in the Baltics and beyond.

The Baltic Centre for Media Excellence (BCME) is an independent non-profit organisation, founded in November 2015. From its birth as a grassroots initiative of the Baltic journalistic community, BCME has grown into a powerful hub for smart journalism in the Baltics and beyond. It promotes professional growth, media intelligence and critical thinking, and strives for positive change in journalism and the communities it serves.

BCME focuses on the needs of independent media outlets in the region and provides them with tools essential for sustainable development: hands-on vocational training and mentorships in journalism and media management, quality media market research and audience analysis, as well as meaningful coordination of the donor community involved in media support across the region.

We advance tech-savvy professionalism, resilience and inclusiveness among media creators, but BCME is equally focused on educating and empowering media audiences. By promoting media literacy and critical thinking, especially among those groups most vulnerable to disinformation and propaganda messages, BCME contributes to establishing knowledgeable and inquisitive audiences and a demand for quality journalism. Disinformation resilience has become one of the main priorities of BCME as it is an important part of all the activities mentioned above.

This report covers the main activities of the BCME in all these core areas during 2020. The latest information about BCME projects is available on the centre's website – [www.bcme.eu](http://www.bcme.eu)

It was a year of disruptions and cancellations which dominated everyday news, changed our lives, caused thousands of deaths and disrupted economies worldwide. Media ecosystems could not escape these changes and projects implemented by the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence were also affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In spite of all the difficulties, we can proudly say that this was a very important year for the centre as we were able to adapt very quickly to the new situation and use opportunities brought by the pandemic to reach a new level in our activities.

I am pleased to say that BCME continued most of its programmes and obligations by rapidly developing various digital solutions and online activities. We were able to keep our commitments and deliver our services throughout the Baltics and Eastern Partnership countries, overcoming restrictions on international travel. In terms of impact, we are proud of the series of innovations and digital breakthroughs achieved by our media partners.

We continued the work to strengthen the Baltic public service broadcasters by developing tailor-made development programmes and being vocal supporters of their editorial independence. Another area we addressed was local and hyper-local media, including minority outlets who were being severely affected by both the Covid-19 pandemic and the spread of disinformation.

We were able to strengthen our presence in Eastern Partnership countries through deepening our facilitation of the coordination and information exchange between media donor institutions. Our research and databases have also become core components of our activities in this region.

Although some of our annual media literacy activities shrank in scale, we expanded in other areas, for example by widening our cooperation with teachers. We were also successful in moving a number of our discussions, conferences and webinars online, attracting strong participation and positive feedback from wide audiences.

Disinformation resilience has become one of our main priorities, ranging from training programmes to research and public events.

Lastly, I want to pay tribute to the BCME team and our long-term partners for their extraordinary work and commitment during such a challenging time. The same goes to our media partners who have demonstrated their exceptional ability to adapt and apply new knowledge and innovations in their everyday practice.



*"In the spring of 2020, when Covid-19 came along, advertising revenue fell by 30% and newspaper sales by 50%. However, the audience on our website and Facebook account at the end of the year is about twice as big as in 2019"*  
– Renaldas Malychas, Director of 'Taurages Kurjeris', a newspaper in Taurage (Lithuania).

*"The responsibilities of all editors (printed, web, social networks) have been clarified, the cooperation model has been discussed. Journalists have changed their habits not to stick to the traditional press. Now everyone can create reports quickly and adjust the content to the relevant media platform"* – Ints Grasis, Editor-In-Chief of "Kurzemes Vārds", a newspaper in Liepāja (Latvia).

BCME media consultant Alexander Grigorian working with Vidzeme TV cameramen on multimedia storytelling, Valmiera, 2020  
Photo: Signe Valtīņa

The pandemic imposed a wide range of changes on BCME's media training activities. Our existing short and intensive onsite training modules required a significant redesign due to the Covid-19 restrictions, which gave us an opportunity to think about the goals and expected results of the training in a new way. We adapted the previous training approaches to online formats – made training sessions more goal oriented and gave participants more time to process their newly acquired knowledge and apply it on a daily basis. This approach has brought remarkable results – several multimedia projects were carried out in 2020, both in regional media outlets and the public broadcasters, and the use of several digital tools was implemented in the newsrooms – this has been one of BCME's main training activities in 2020.

During the training sessions, participants gained a greater understanding of the power of multimedia and mobile storytelling tools, the power of visuals nowadays, knowledge of the use of smartphones in visual reporting, contemporary presenting techniques, more appealing educational and cultural content, innovations in documentary production and the use of 360 video cameras, fact checking, and new content marketing and ad sales techniques. Likewise, participants had the opportunity to experiment, produce real outputs and reach new audiences.

The mentoring sessions have also provided journalists with opportunities for international networking between newsrooms and for knowledge exchange. Last but not least, the mentoring sessions have certainly inspired fresh, positive vibes in the newsrooms and encouraged the production of content which is not commercially focused, such as cultural, educational and minority language content, thus fostering an understanding and appreciation for accountable public interest journalism.

#### Developing Local Media for Local Communities

One of the utmost priorities of BCME is to support local media so that they can be a pillar of a credible information space and democracy in their respective communities. In 2020, in cooperation with *Internews*, BCME continued a long-term comprehensive development program involving 13 local and hyper-local media organisations in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The programme aims to demonstrate that local media can successfully meet digital challenges and create compelling multimedia content, attract wider audiences on social networks, increase advertising revenue and introduce innovative paid-content platforms. The ability to go into the needs of each specific newsroom and find the most efficient way to solve existing problems has become a hallmark of the BCME brand. The most common desire expressed when journalists and media managers were asked what help was needed most was for ways to improve efforts to increase income from online activities and new product launches.

A number of media organisations across the Baltics have received grants for the introduction of new web portals, taking communication with their audiences to a new, significantly higher level. This made it much easier to meet people's demand for news at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, when traffic to media portals increased by more than a third. Through

mentoring from BCME trainers, newsrooms produced multimedia stories to cover the impact of the pandemic on the local economy and the social sphere.

### Regional Schools of Journalism

BCME organised two regional journalism schools in the Latvian regions of Latgale and Vidzeme. They were attended by journalists from local media outlets, as well as freelancers and schoolchildren who dream of becoming professional journalists in the future. Internationally experienced trainers led practical seminars on new multimedia formats and data journalism, social media content creation, photo design, text editing and other topics. The school of journalism in Daugavpils, the second largest city in Latvia in which the majority of the population is Russian-speaking and the influence of Russian disinformation is more noticeable, was of utmost importance. The project made a practical contribution to improving the local information environment, as the best school participants received scholarships to create analytical and multimedia materials to enrich the content of local media.

*“Digital orders have grown by 200%, around 40% of our stories are behind a paywall, and people are buying them. The workflow of our newsroom has been changed so that digital and traditional newspaper are different products” – Gunnar Siiner, Director of “Saarte Haal”, a local media company in Kuressaare (Estonia). In March, the town and whole island of Saaremaa in the Baltic Sea was cut off from the mainland for several weeks due to being the region most affected by the pandemic in the country.*

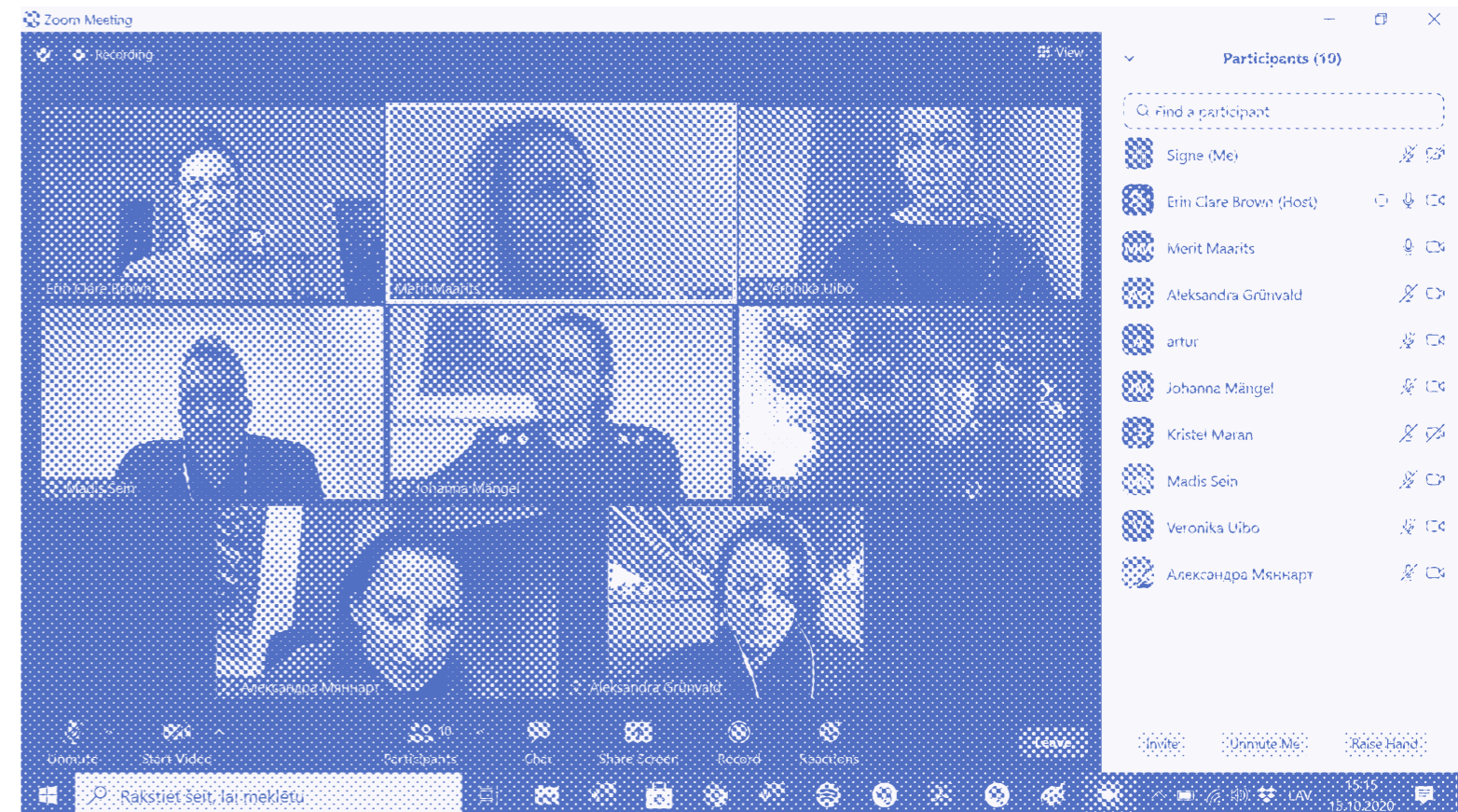
### Encouraging New Media Talents

Looking for potential young journalists and providing training for them has always been important to BCME, trying both to attract talents in the Baltic media outlets and to promote media literacy in the wider public. In 2020, journalism schools for young people aged 15-19 organised by BCME took place in cooperation with the region’s leading media organisations – public broadcaster “ERR” in Estonia, “Delfi.lv” in Latvia and “LaisvesTV” in Lithuania. More than 40 young people were lucky enough to visit editorial offices in person while that was possible and the Covid-19 situation was better, to see how daily media content is created and, most importantly, to learn about and carry out multimedia media projects together with well-known journalists and producers. Pre- and post-training tests showed that these seminars improved young people’s understanding of the basic principles of quality journalism, enabling them to become promoters of media literacy among their peers.

*“The school of young journalists in “Delfi.lv” newsroom” Kārlis Dambrāns, Delfi.*



The programme’s long-term goal is to increase the impact of the independent media support programmes that donor institutions are implementing in the European Union Eastern Partnership (EaP) states. To achieve this goal, the programme carries out research activities identifying the needs of independent media and offering recommendations and other research tools to respond to those needs. BCME EaP works closely with the media donor institutions, disseminating research outputs and building their impact as well as facilitating the donor coordination and information exchange process. In 2020, the EaP programme both began new activities and continued those which had already been started in support of the programme’s long-term aims.



BCME media consultant Erin Brown teaching ERR young journalists mobile storytelling, Zoom, 2020. Screenshot: Signe Valtīņa

### Reporting on the Covid-19 pandemic

A special BCME activity was the promotion of media literacy content projects. In spring of 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic broke out and reached a massive scale, the BCME initiated and carried out a snap report, “Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on the Media Sector in Eastern Partnership Countries”.

The BCME initiated this survey on the assumption that the situation for independent media in the EaP countries might be far graver than in the more mature democracies. The aim of this study was to test this assumption and provide donor governments with insight on the specific circumstances resulting from the pandemic in EaP countries, track any regional trends, and collect information about the media sector’s needs.



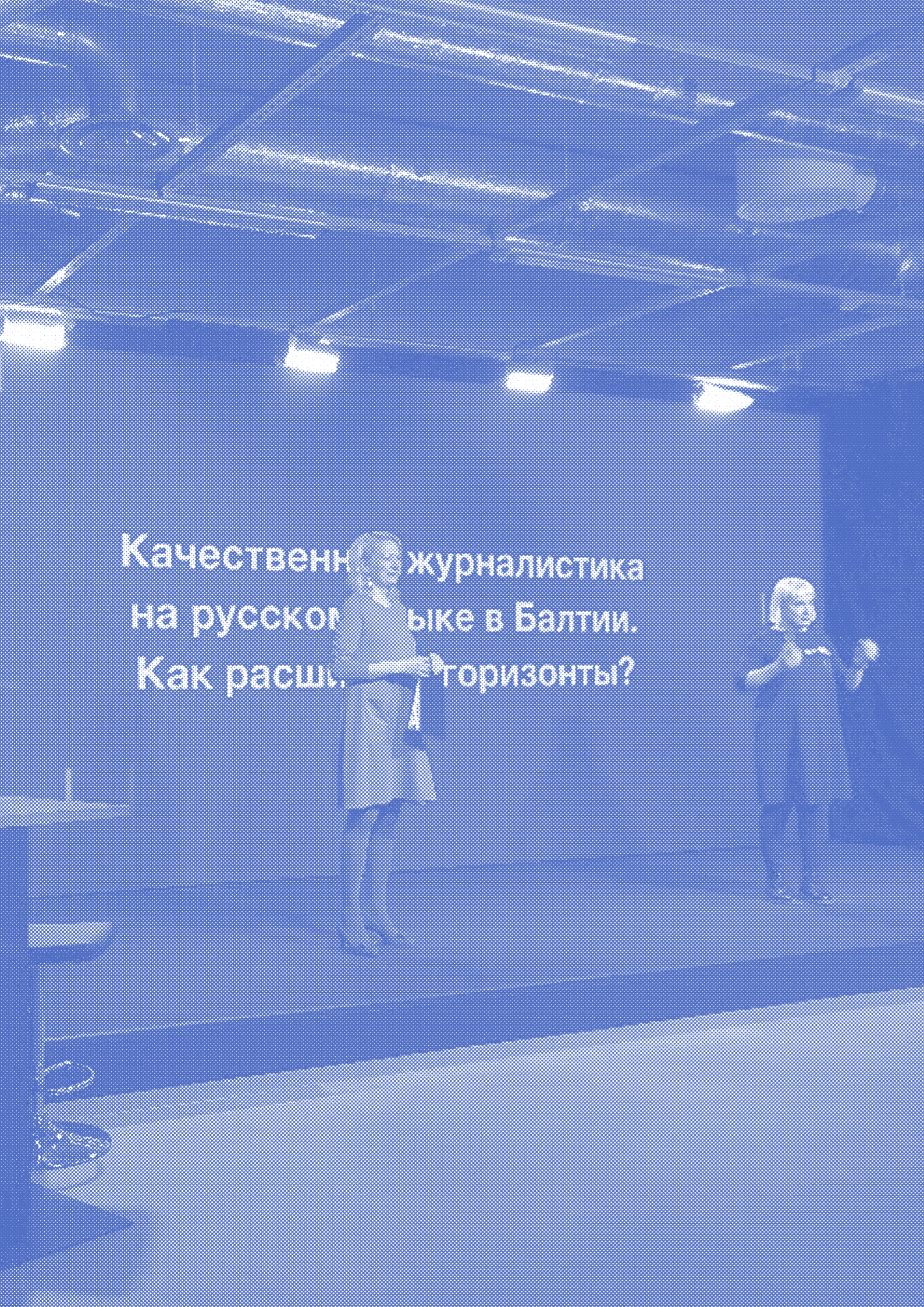
### Evaluating public service broadcasting

Responding to the situation in the EaP countries, the BCME also produced several smaller-scale, ad-hoc reports addressing pressing media-related issues in particular countries. Such reports, with accompanying policy recommendations, were produced for Azerbaijan, Belarus and Moldova. In the case of Moldova, which held a presidential election in November 2020, the BCME prepared a special report entitled “Assessment of Public Media Performance in the Presidential Election in Moldova November 2020”. The report provided a rapid assessment of the performance of the public broadcaster in the coverage of the election campaign, voting and reporting of results, with a particular emphasis on its compliance with its own editorial, as well as international, standards and responsibility to provide an impartial public service. The report, as with the other reports, was presented and distributed to the donor institutions working in the country.

### Deeper donor coordination

In 2020, the BCME EaP programme also deepened and expanded its involvement in facilitating the coordination and information exchange among the EaP media donor institutions. In close cooperation with the co-hosts of the Media Donors Group, the BCME contributed to the Media Donors Group’s work by providing insights and research-based policy recommendations for donors’ discussions. The programme also started its work on designing and creating the Media Donors Database – a tool to provide the donor community with comprehensive, in-depth information on the media support programmes carried out in the EaP countries, enabling them to better coordinate their work.

BCME media consultant Erin Brown teaching ERR young journalists mobile storytelling, Zoom, 2020. Screenshot: Signe Valtīņa



#### Minority media conference

In November 2020, BCME organised the online conference “Empowering Quality Russian-language Journalism in the Baltics”. The event, which was held in cooperation with the Baltic Independent Media project, the Nordic Council of Ministers Office in Latvia and the Nordic Journalist Centre, brought together more than 100 high-ranking public service experts and media professionals. During the event, the challenges for and threats to a strong and competitive Russian-language media landscape in the Baltics were discussed, including the digital, political and financial pressures, and the need for rapid change.

#### Conversation festival “LAMPA”

The annual democracy festival “LAMPA” was held in a hybrid format in accordance with the Covid-19 restrictions, with some of the audiences joining online and some able to participate on site. BCME organised the discussion “News as entertainment: will it save the media business?”, highlighting the media initiatives throughout the Baltics that have been able to attract new audiences and introduce new formats in order to deliver high quality, professional journalism. Although there is widespread pessimism in the media industry, the discussion highlighted innovative, high quality products. “Laisve TV” from Lithuania took part in the discussion, telling how they were able to create an influential media company starting from a few YouTube programmes. Representatives from the Re:Baltica Latvian satirical show “Starp citu” told their success story, as did the Estonian newcomers to the Baltic media industry, “Levila”.

#### Online events

The outbreak of Covid-19 created a steady stream of misinformation on social media and various questionable websites. At the same time, the pandemic accelerated the wider acceptance of digital tools for connecting and building networks among media professionals. It is clear today that virtual events will remain a large part of the industry even after the Covid-19 crisis has passed. BCME focused on online education. Together with seasoned journalists and media experts, BCME organised a series of webinars for journalists from Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia on the following subjects: fact-checking, using digital tools to cover the pandemic, regional media challenges and possible means of monetisation, data journalism, covering the economic implications of Covid-19, and others. Also, a media literacy conference for 250 Latvian teachers was organised in cooperation with the Latvian Ministry of Culture.

Gunta Sloga (BCME) and Olga Dragijeva (LTV) during the Online Conference “Empowering Quality Russian-language Journalism in the Baltics”, November 2020. Photo: Viktorija Terentjeva

### Funds4Media Baltic

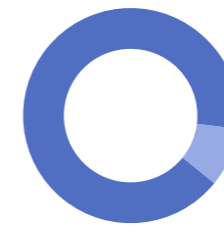
Newsletters are one of the best ways to help people stay up to date on the latest media industry news. The BCME monthly electronic newsletter “Funds4Media Baltic Ed.” keeps readers posted about resources such as internships, freelance opportunities, scholarships, reading recommendations, journalism tips, fact-checking, and other resources to help inform the news cycle. Each “Funds4Media Baltic Ed.” edition highlights funding opportunities and tools that can help improve a reporter’s workflow. The newsletter has a readership of 260 subscribers.

“The BCME newsletter is extremely important for journalists’ professional development, especially given the context of insufficient funding for media outlets in the Baltics. With the assistance of the newsletter, journalists and other media professionals learn about various grants, exchange programmes and online master classes. This is very important not only for media professionals, but for society in general, since only educated journalists who constantly update their knowledge, can set the agenda,” says Ilya Kozin, the chairman of the board of the Latvian Association of Journalists.

### Funds4Media EaP

BCME continued to produce and distribute the monthly electronic newsletter “Funds4Media”. The newsletter summarises funding opportunities for media organisations and journalists from EaP states. It provides media representatives and journalists with direct, easy-to-understand, up-to-date information about offers of support from donors. Currently there are just over 950 subscribers on the e-mail mailing list for the newsletter and more than 9,000 recipients who receive the newsletter via e-mail lists and other communication channels of BCME partner organisations across the Eastern Partnership region.

### Main positions of the BCME budget in 2020 in EUROS



#### Income:

Grants EUR 863 743

Other income EUR 42 528

#### Expenses

##### Administrative expenses:

BCME staff EUR 269 664

Office rent and utilities EUR 26 272

##### Implementation of projects:

Project activities and implementation EUR 388 882

Fees for outsourced trainers and experts EUR 127 597

Other project-related technical costs EUR 43 794

### Our supporters

- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia
- The Nordic Council of Ministers
- The Danish Cultural Institute in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania
- Konrad Adenauer Stiftung
- The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
- The British Council
- The United States Embassy in Latvia
- The EEA and Norway Grants
- The Embassy of Denmark
- The Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany
- The Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands
- The Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia
- The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)
- The European Parliament



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