ZAGORKA INITIATIVE Croatia

Zagorka is a pioneering initiative named after Croatian journalist Marija Jurić Zagorka, the first modern female political journalist on the European continent. It is conceived as a structured network of mentorship, safety, and resilience for young women journalists. This initiative connects some of the strongest and most credible women journalists into a support network. In Croatia and the wider region, the network deliberately links award-winning, high-trust journalists (national and international prize holders) with young women entering the profession. In this way, professional reputation is turned into protection, knowledge transfer, skills development, and institutional backing. But Zagorke are not only a mentorship and support network: they also confront and seek solutions to the most urgent problems facing women in journalism today.

The scale of the problem is confirmed by global data. A UNESCO/ICFJ study found that 73% of women journalists have experienced online violence; 25% received threats of physical violence, 18% threats of sexual violence, and 20% reported offline attacks connected to online abuse. These figures show that we are not dealing with isolated incidents, but with a widespread pattern that has direct consequences for safety, mental health, and the ability of women journalists to remain and thrive in the profession. And this is exactly why it is crucial to say clearly: this is no longer “just harassment”. It reflects patterns of modern digital warfare. Online abuse against women journalists is increasingly coordinated, identity-based, and strategically useful for silencing scrutiny, contaminating the public sphere, and deterring watchdog reporting that holds power to account and protects the public interest.

EFJ data reinforces this picture and shows how systematic and gendered these attacks have become. In an EFJ survey referenced in the report *Ending the Silence on Online Harassment of Journalists*, 87% of respondents said that women in their organisations were targeted, with frequent gender-based attacks. The same EFJ survey data show that half of respondents reported racist abuse, and that the forms of online abuse commonly include hate speech (82%), insults (78%), rape threats (40%), and other forms of gender-based violence (65%). The impact is not abstract: 69% of respondents mentioned fear for their own safety and for loved ones, and 56% reported withdrawing from social media. This is how intimidation works in practice by pushing journalists into silence, self-censorship, and isolation.

The Zagorke mentorship network emerged from a real, concrete need on the ground. Young women journalists today enter the profession amid insecure contracts, political and economic pressures, more frequent online attacks, and an overall weakening of protection for journalism as a profession. In such conditions, women journalists are too often left alone without safety support, without professional backup, without a space to ask questions, and without a system that protects them when they come under pressure.

Zagorke respond to that gap. This is not a one-off training session or a “photo-op project”, but a living network built on the understanding that women journalists must protect one another, strengthen one another, and pass on knowledge because without safe women journalists, there is no free journalism.

The core idea is simple: young women journalists get someone beside them someone who understands the profession, pressures, editorial dynamics, threats and boundaries, and who can help them navigate concrete situations in a smarter, safer, and more professional way. At the heart of the programme is one-to-one mentorship. Mentors and mentees agree on the rhythm of meetings; conversations are confidential and focused on real challenges; mentorship is not a lecture, but a process of support and mutual learning. Through that relationship, young women journalists gain a safer space for questions and dilemmas, support in professional decisions, help in building confidence and clear boundaries, and practical guidance on how to respond to pressures and attacks.

There is also an essential public-facing dimension. Zagorke send a clear message to the profession and to society: women journalists are here, they work, they uphold standards, and they will not give up. Visibility of mentors and their work, recognition of young women journalists who are determined to do serious journalism, the affirmation of journalism as a democratic profession, and strengthening trust in women's professional journalism are part of the broader purpose: defending journalism and protecting the people who do it.

Zagorke are not a "women's issue" in the sense of a niche. They address a structural crisis for the entire media sector: the collapse of safety and stability in journalistic work. When young women journalists leave because of harassment, threats, and insecure conditions, newsrooms lose future generations, watchdog journalism weakens, self-censorship grows, and the public loses information. Zagorke are therefore an investment in the future of journalism and in the public interest.

The next phase of Zagorke focuses on expanding the mentorship network due to strong interest and a high number of applications, strengthening programme content and support for young women journalists, continuing gatherings and exchange, creating lasting resources and materials (guidelines, handbooks, recommendations), and connecting Zagorke with other trade-union priorities: labour rights, protection from mobbing, fighting SLAPP lawsuits, and strengthening editorial autonomy.

Zagorke bring together experience and a new generation of women journalists in a support system that strengthens professional standards, safety, and solidarity creating practical mechanisms of protection and empowerment at a time when women journalists are increasingly targeted by attacks, pressure, and attempts to silence them. Zagorke do what systems too often fail to do: they protect the people doing one of the most important jobs in a democracy.