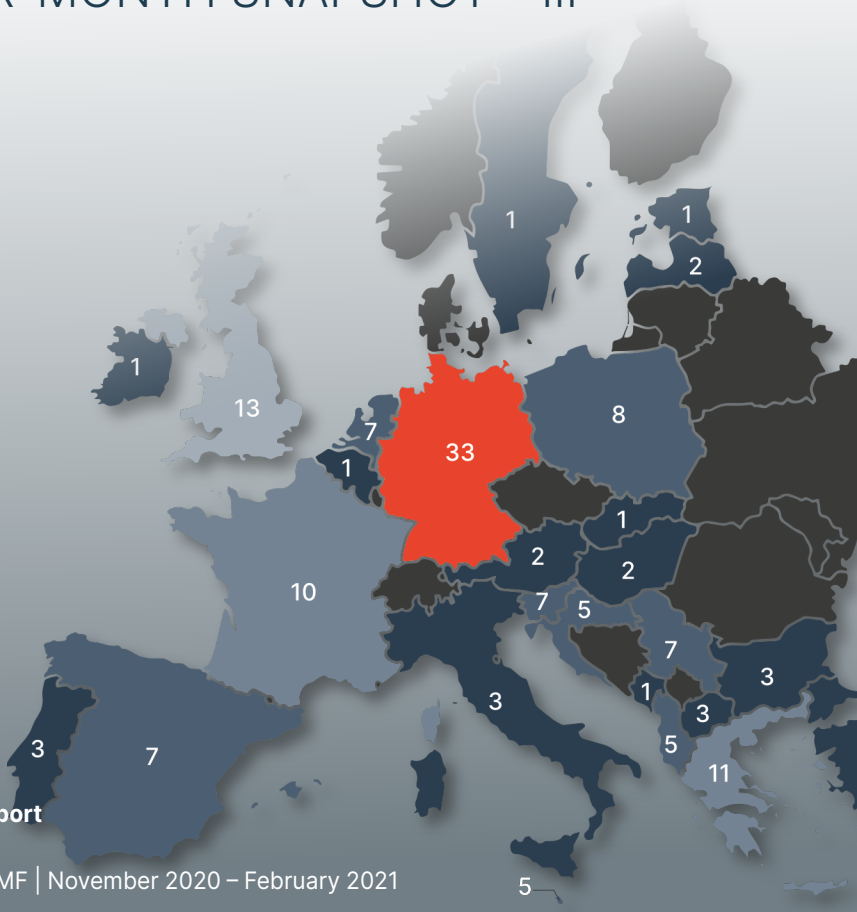
MEDIA FREEDOM RAPID RESPONSE

MAPPING MEDIA FREEDOM

A FOUR-MONTH SNAPSHOT – III



Monitoring Report

EFJ – IPI – ECPMF | November 2020 – February 2021

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MEDIA FREEDOM RAPID RESPONSE

Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) tracks, monitors and responds to violations of press and media freedom in EU Member States and Candidate Countries. This project provides legal and practical support, public advocacy and information to protect journalists and media workers. The MFRR is organised by an consortium led by the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF) with ARTICLE 19, the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), Free Press Unlimited (FPU), the Institute for Applied Informatics at the University of Leipzig (InfAI), International Press Institute (IPI) and CCI/Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT). The project is co-funded by the European Commission.

www.mfrr.eu

Introduction

The third monitoring report for the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR), covering the reporting period between November 2020 and February 2021 represents the final four month period of the first 12 months of the MFRR. These three reports, taken together based on analysis of data from the Mapping Media Freedom platform (MMF), have demonstrated a complex and ever-changing media freedom landscape. A dominant trend is clear: there is no one source or type of threat that we need to protect against. This is a landscape replete with competing motivations, political contexts, methods and tools deployed to target media freedom that undermines the efficacy of a silver bullet approach to protecting journalists. Instead the analysis shows the need for long term, in-depth and nuanced responses from national, regional and supranational bodies, alongside increased public solidarity and support.

In the four-month reporting period between November 2020 and the end of February 2021, 147 alerts (with 256 attacked persons or entities related to media) in 27 countries were uploaded to Mapping Media Freedom. When compared with the overall number of alerts from the two previous reports, this demonstrates the highest number yet:

- March to June 2020 – **120 alerts**
- July to October 2020 – **114 alerts**

While the nature, complexity and specifics of these alerts cannot be directly compared, a number of key trends and developments can be traced across all three reports. This includes the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has directly impacted media freedom or given cover for state and non-state actors to target journalists and media workers; the continued use of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) and other vexatious lawsuits aimed at intimidating journalists into silence; the mobilisation of anti-media sentiment at protests to dissuade independent coverage, as well as the corrosive impact of online harassment, threats and smear campaigns directed at journalists, most explicitly women. Taken together these reports highlight trends, particularly with regard to the safety of journalists, moving along a worrying trajectory that looks likely to outlast the first year of the MFRR.

The longer these trends continue unaddressed and unopposed, the more likely these issues and threats will be embedded into European society, redefining the relationship between media actors, the state, private companies and the general public. This potential transformation of the media freedom landscape is cast in stark light by the vast reconfigurations that have been needed to address the COVID-19 pandemic across Europe. Whether this is the restrictions of travel, the inadequate protections for journalists being able to report freely in public, the restrictions on access to expertise and information, as well as the use of pandemic relief funds to reward 'friendly' outlets and

starve critical outlets, the impact of the pandemic on media freedom cannot be underplayed. The pandemic brought forward a number of indirect threats, through the increase of anti-lockdown and anti-mask protests which invited significant threats of harassment and physical violence from protesters, as well as increased interactions with police officers who too often, not only failed to protect journalists but also were the source of a number of media freedom violations across Europe. The impact of this reconfigured landscape is not only an issue of contemporary importance but is something that requires constant vigilance. A concern that falls outside the remit of this report but haunts these pages is the fear that the modifications established under the pretense of the pandemic will not be repealed or reevaluated after the pandemic subsides, leaving them as immovable aspects of the environment that journalists, media workers, outlets and whistle blowers will have to learn to navigate. This slow but irrevocable shift of norms, laws, expectations and commitments can speed up the normalisation of threats facing journalists and media workers, positioning certain violations as 'just part of the job'. This can be seen already in the widespread online harassment facing journalists, predominantly women, journalists of colour and the LGBTQI community that, without robust and structural responses, has become a worrying aspect of modern journalism, if the journalist chooses to continue to work.

Mapping Media Freedom is an innovative platform that collates verified media freedom violations and enables real-time monitoring of the media freedom landscape. However, how do we track and respond to violations that emerge from the manipulation of legitimate business and regulatory actions brought about through the capture of oversight bodies by pro-state interests? A number of countries across Europe, including Hungary, Poland and Slovenia, have used the sale and purchase of media outlets, the formation and structure of media regulators and state funding for public media outlets to expand state control of media outlets to restrict independent and critical reporting. The threats to media freedom from the buying or selling media outlets, certain regulatory decisions and state aid are cloaked by bureaucratic, legal and regulatory processes but highlight a significant threat to media freedom that requires significant expertise and coordinated action to address. The recent dispute between the European Parliament's LIBE Committee and Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša, after he attempted to play a video documenting perceived bias in the Slovenia media market during a discussion about media freedom in Slovenia highlights the current complex and tense relationship between a number of European states and European institutions.

However, not all incidents escape broader awareness due to structural complexities. In fact, physical attacks against journalists are oftentimes the most visible and alarming demonstration of a toxic and dangerous working environment for journalists. The nature of these attacks are varied. Physical attacks can be used to prevent journalists and media workers from carrying out their work while in the field. This violence can be a by-product of highly charged situations, such as protests, raids or arrests or can be used to dissuade other journalists from following their colleagues and covering certain topics.. These forms of attacks are not monopolised by certain actors either. As outlined below, physical violence has been deployed by private individuals, oftentimes in the context of ongoing protests or public upheaval, alongside violence administered by police officers. This latter group requires specific attention due to their legal obligations to protect journalists and the equipment they use - especially within the context of policing protests - that can be used in attacks to make the possibility of injuries more likely.

This monitoring report follows on from the two previous reports published covering the periods from March to June 2020, and July to October 2020. This report uses the same approach and format to analyse the trends, themes and topics that shaped media freedom in the MFRR region as a whole, alongside specific analysis targeted at a range of countries that require specific attention. For more information about the MFRR's monitoring of media freedom violations, please read the previous monitoring reports found here. This report compiled by MFRR partners, EFJ and IPI, with support from the ECPMF, analyses and presents a micro- and macro- level diagnosis of the health of the European media landscape over a four-month period.

This report is structured in five sections. First we will present a visual representation of different datasets from MMF to present an overall picture of the platform and the broad health of the media environment in EU Member States and Candidate Countries. Following this is a country-by-country analysis divided between IPI and EFJ, which includes specific analysis of a selection of countries within the MFRR region. Following this is a Cross Regional Thematic Comparative Analysis, which explores trends that affect media and press freedom across the entire MFRR region, including the capture of media regulators and outlets by state or pro-state entities, alongside an analysis of the use of physical violence aimed at journalists and media workers.

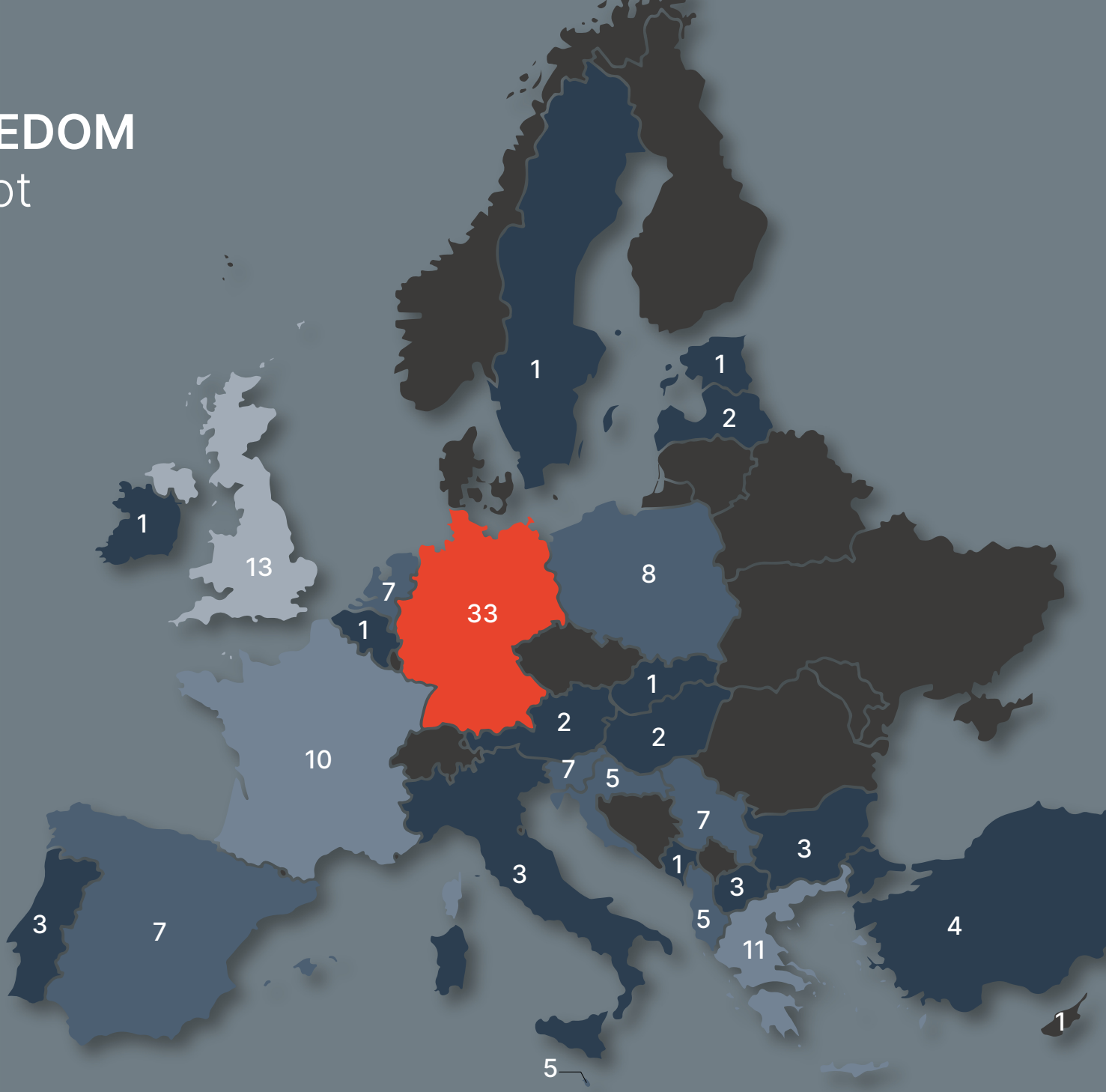
Due to the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside government responses to it, a dedicated chapter that continues the MFRR analysis of the pandemic is included, followed by a conclusion that brings all analysis together.

MAPPING MEDIA FREEDOM
A Four-Month Snapshot

101
PHYSICAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL THREAT

37
LEGAL THREAT

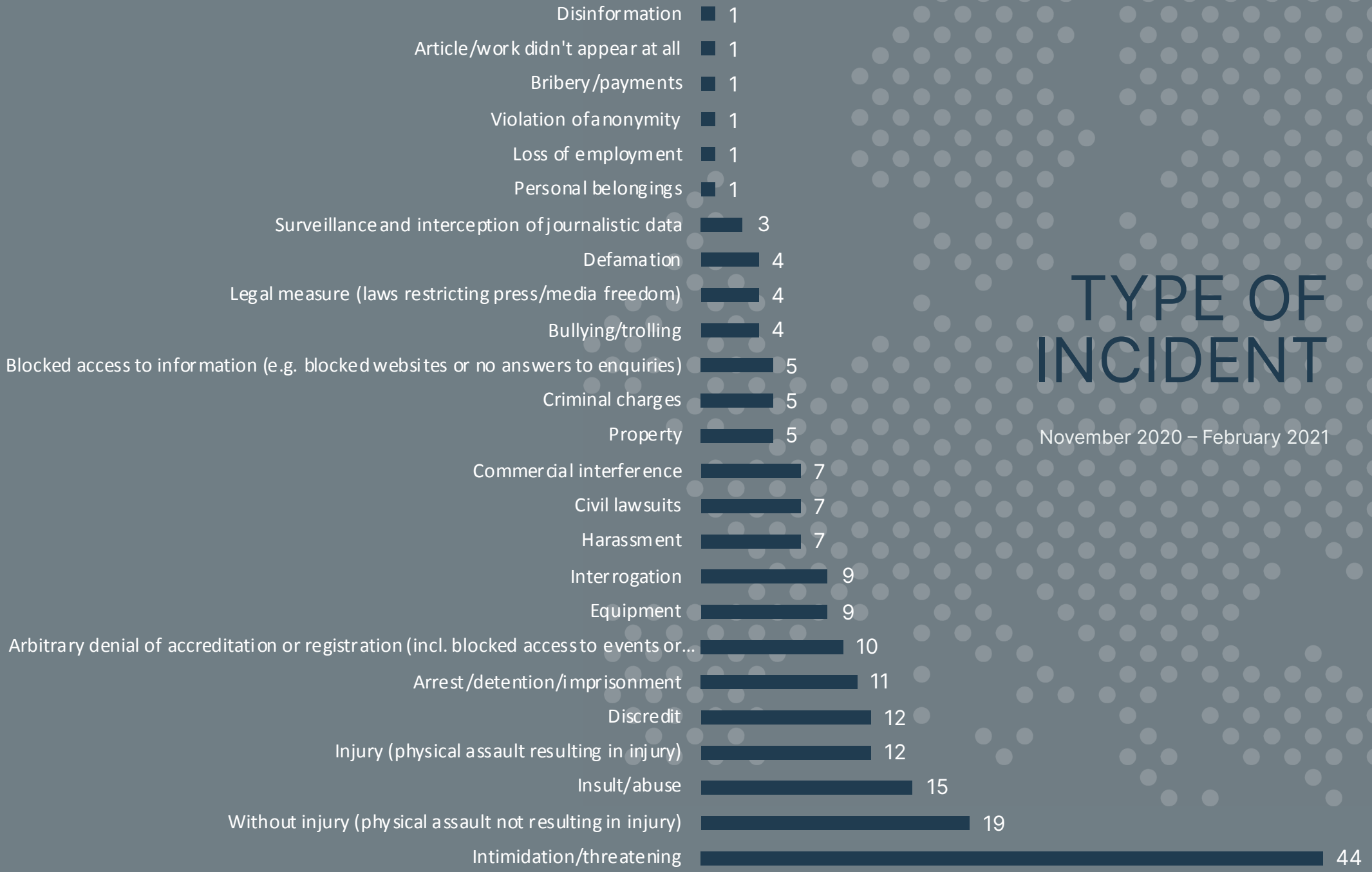
21
CENSORSHIP



*As one alert can contain a number of incidents or threats of further action, the figures above adds up to more than the total number of alerts

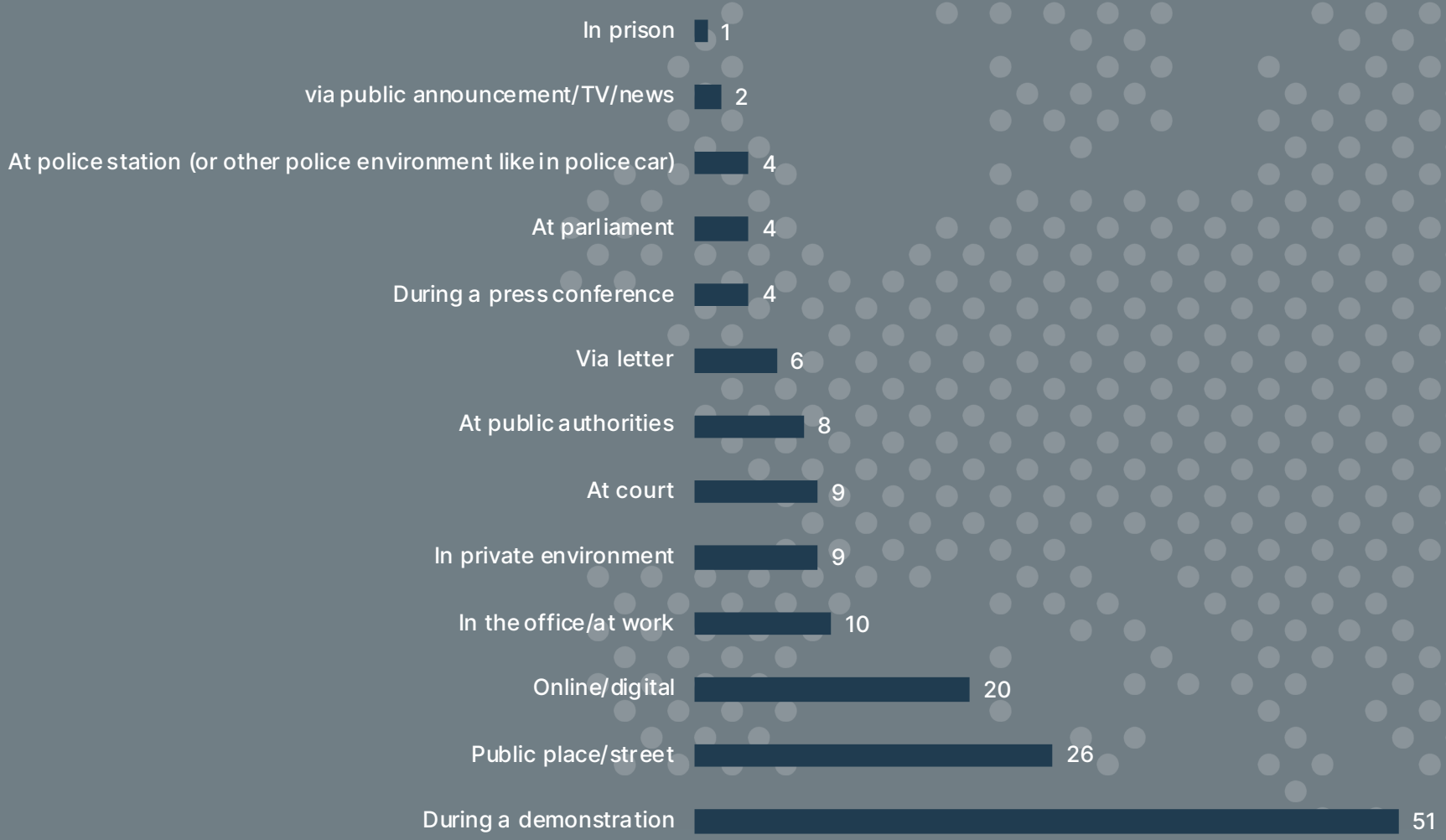
TYPE OF INCIDENT

November 2020 – February 2021



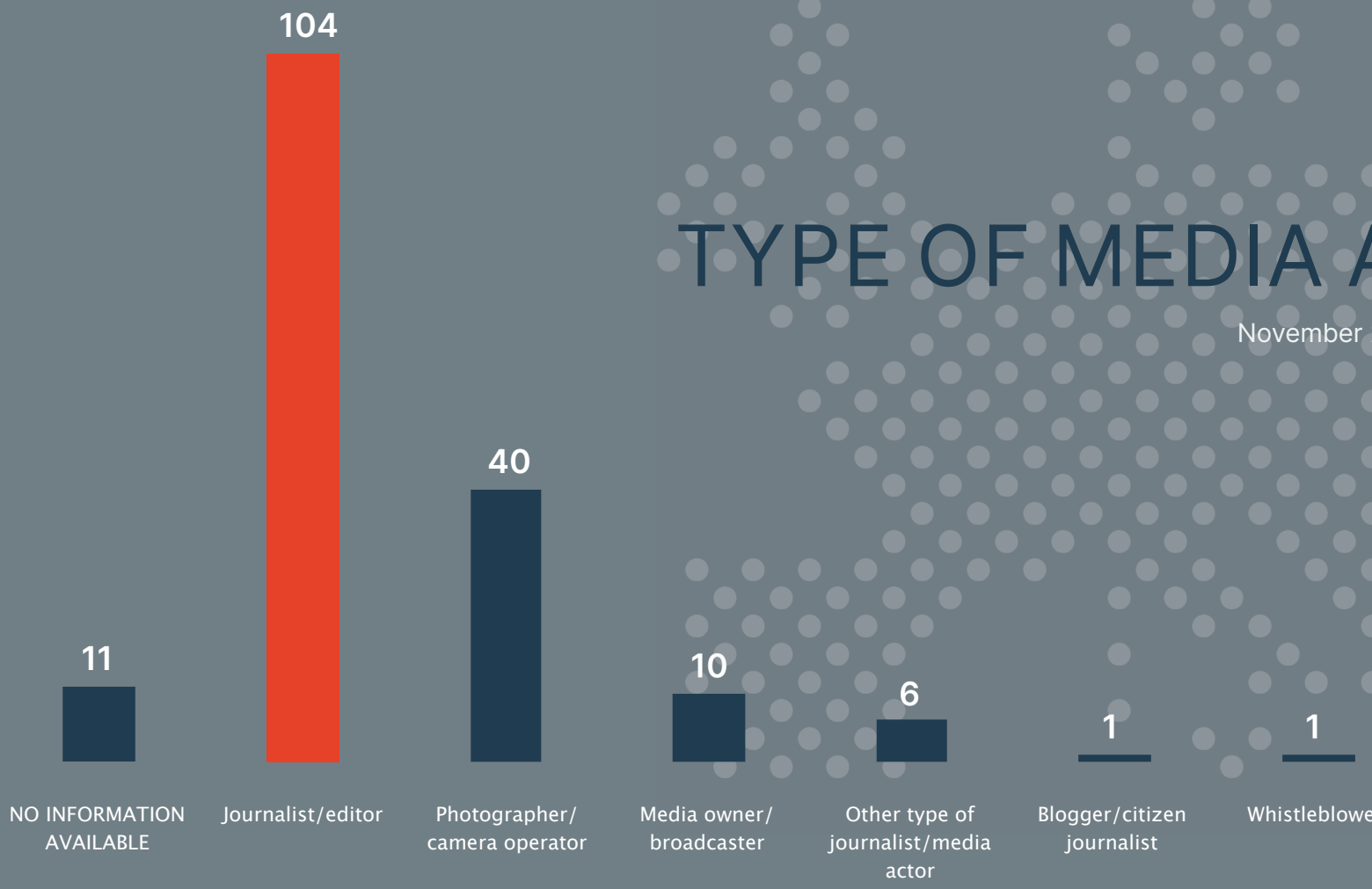
CONTEXT OF INCIDENT

November 2020 – February 2021



TYPE OF MEDIA ACTOR

November 2020 – February 2021



SOURCE OF INCIDENT

November 2020 – February 2021

POLICE / STATE SECURITY

44

LEGISLATION

20

JUDICIARY

8

POLITICAL PARTY

2

CORPORATION / COMPANY

4

PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

2

PRIVATE INDIVIDUAL(S)

52

PRIVATE SECURITY

2

CRIMINAL ORGANISATION

3

ANOTHER MEDIA

2

UNKNOWN SOURCE

13

EMPLOYER/ PUBLISHER/ COLLEAGUE(S)

2

Country-by-Country Analysis (EFJ)

Germany

33 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

In the reporting period, in terms of Mapping Media Freedom alerts, Germany led both the EU Member States and Candidate countries with 33 recorded alerts This number of alerts per country is the highest recorded by the MFRR partners since March 2020. While this can partly be explained by the strength of the MFRR's networks in Germany, it clearly confirms a trend in the deterioration of press and media freedom, especially when it comes to covering demonstrations. Twenty-seven violations took place during protests, 22 of which were committed by private individuals, whose low regard towards journalists and decreasing trust in traditional media leads to verbal and physical violence.

As already highlighted in the two previous reports, protests and rallies are difficult reporting venues for journalists. Out of the 33 alerts, 22 were reported during the particularly violent "Querdenken" demonstrations against the government's COVID-19 measures in Leipzig on the weekend of 7 and 8 November 2020. The most common type of incident fell into the category of intimidation/threat, with 13 alerts. The second most common type of violation was physical assaults not resulting in injury (5), harassment (5) and arbitrary denial of accreditation (5).

On 7 November 2020, a journalist reported that a demonstrator against COVID-19 measures threatened him with death, shouting "not much longer and you will all hang". On the same day, a group of 12-15 journalists covering the same protest in Leipzig was attacked by a group of about 100 people. The police didn't intervene to protect the journalists, who had to extricate themselves from the situation.

As journalists have not been offered enough police protection and intervention during such violent demonstrations, German journalists unions have repeatedly called for better police training to enable journalists to do their job. However, in 9 cases, police or state security were the sources of alerts themselves: such cases ranged from the police preventing journalists from taking pictures, threatening arrest or isolating media workers into separate areas.

Several cases of online harassment were also recorded in relation to the events: photos of journalists were posted on social media with insults or even antisemitic slurs (3 alerts). In one incident, an attack on a journalist reporting on the Leipzig protests for the "Jewish Forum" was justified in a Telegram conversation because "otherwise there would have been even more Jewish press about us." In another case, news anchor Dunja Hayali received a threatening and abusive letter, which was signed off with 'Heil Hitler'. As highlighted in previous reports, right-wing extremist groups who had joined the "Querdenken" demonstrations, also well established online, continue to pose a threat to journalists' work in Germany.

Apart from impeding journalistic work during demonstrations, obstacles to freedom of information were also recorded in other settings. On 18 February, a journalist for the local newspaper Thüringer Allgemeine (TA) was barred from the city council meetings by the councilor following two articles discussing the holding of the mayoral election in the context of the pandemic. In another case, Instagram and Facebook deleted a ARD investigative documentary about the Hanau shootings from their platforms for "violations of the community guidelines". Both cases had important consequences on the right to inform and be informed.

United Kingdom

13 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

The situation in the United Kingdom has not improved compared to the previous reporting periods. Out of 13 cases, 10 cases of harassment and psychological abuse were uploaded to MMF, including many serious life-threatening threats against journalists in Northern Ireland (6 alerts) and Scotland (1).

Already denounced repeatedly in previous reports and statements, the situation in Northern Ireland will remain of great concern as long as impunity prevails. Strong commitment from the authorities is crucial to effectively follow up investigations and set an example in a country where organised crime and paramilitary organisations continue to threaten the life of journalists and harm relatives of a deceased reporter.

Last February, almost one year and a half after the murder of Lyra McKee, gunned down while she was covering riots in Derry, her memory was targeted in a graffiti qualified as "beyond disgusting" by a relative. A few days before, Allison Morris, the security correspondent and columnist for The Irish News, posted a photo on her twitter account documenting graffiti targeting her on a wall in Rosapenna Street in Belfast. The graffiti read "Alison [sic] Moris [sic] MI5 Agent". Next to the text was a crosshair.

The week before, a similar menacing graffiti including a gun crosshair and naming journalist Patricia Devlin was discovered in at least two locations in East Belfast. This followed online trolling aimed at Devlin (referring to an 'anti-loyalist antagonist tabloid journalist') on Ulster Volunteer Force-linked online groups. The case of crime reporter Patricia Devlin, journalist at Sunday World, is well known to the MFFR, journalists' organisations as well as law enforcement authorities. Yet she has been threatened over a number of years due to her reporting on organised crime in Northern Ireland while those responsible are still at large.

For the second time in 2020, the Belfast Telegraph and Sunday Life newspapers were advised by the Police Service of

Northern Ireland (PSNI) that one of their journalists was at risk from loyalist paramilitaries. The police informed that similar "imminent threats" of attack were targeting two journalists working for the Sunday World newspaper. In February 2021, the Belfast telegraph was warned of a new threat against one of its journalists who was relocated to a secure location and offered protection by the PSNI. This unspecified threat followed the broadcast of a BBC Panorama documentary about a suspected crime boss's influence in world boxing.

In Scotland, the publisher of The Digger magazine had his car set on fire as it was parked outside his home. The same night several shops that stock the magazine were visited and workers were asked to stop selling copies. It is believed that the two attacks are connected to each other and to the magazine's reporting on organised crime in Glasgow.

The United Kingdom has also been the venue of a number of demonstrations. Two alerts document blatant violation of press freedom due to police's behaviour and disregard for basic principles of the right to inform. Several photographers and journalists covering an anti-lockdown protest in London were threatened with arrest by police if they did not leave the scene as their role as journalists (and within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as key workers) was not recognised. They were told that without a special permission to cover the event, they were breaching lockdown rules as members of the public taking part in an illegal gathering. Freelance photographer Andy Aitchison has also been threatened due to poor police judgment when he was arrested at his home after documenting a demonstration in Folkestone. His equipment was seized and he was held in a police cell for over five hours on suspicion of criminal damage of a dwelling. After the immediate intervention of journalists' organisations and the MFRR, all the charges were eventually dropped a few days later. This was not before him being issued with a fine for violating COVID-19 regulations, a decision that was later overturned as being issued erroneously.

Two more cases of online harassment against two female journalists were reported at the beginning of 2021, against Huffington Post UK journalist, Nadine White, and BBC rugby reporter, Sonja McLaughlan. They were both criticised and discredited publicly on social media for their work as journalists.

France

10 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

Attacks on media freedom in France were still very much connected to the debates over the introduction of the "Global Security" bill and the National Policing Plan in the autumn of 2020, which aim to regulate the dissemination of images of law enforcement authorities at work. Several "Marches for Liberties" were organised by civil society organisations during the reporting period, throughout France, calling for the withdrawal of legislation that would severely hinder the ability of journalists and media workers to scrutinise the behaviour of police officers and gendarmes. In this context, more cases of violence and obstruction of journalists' work by the police were recorded, while the French government backtracked and eventually tasked the Senate Law Commission to present a new version of the bill by March 2021.

The alerts involve physical attacks, arbitrary detention of journalists, acts of intimidation, blocked access to public places as well as confiscation of journalistic equipment. In Paris, in November, freelance photographer Ameer Al Halbi had his nose broken by the police with a baton. In December, reporter for the online media QG Adrien AdcaZz was taken into custody for 48 hours and had his press equipment confiscated. While he was informed a month later that his case was closed with no further action against him, and his camera was returned, the memory cards, which included images from the protest, were no longer readable. In the case of Tangi Kermarrec and Hannah Nelson, they were detained as the police considered that they had not dispersed after summons. Police officers relied on the National Policing Plan to justify the custody of the journalists which lasted until the next day.

In a majority of cases - 8 out of 10 - police and authorities were the source of the threat confirming the trend already outlined in previous reports and in other European countries. What happened to photographer Guillaume Fauveau last November is yet another illustration of the very palpable tension on the ground. As he was taking photos of police checks in Bayonne, two police officers refused to appear on pictures citing the new legislation. One added: "it is because of people like you, who take photos of officers, that police officers die afterwards." This statement is a reference to a news story about the murder of two officers in 2016, which was widely used by French Interior Minister to justify the introduction of the "Global Security" bill.

In addition, three cases of obstruction of journalists' work were recorded in relation to the eviction of migrant camps in Calais and Paris. Access to the police operation was not allowed to a number of clearly identified journalists. In particular, a heavy-handed operation 'Place de la République' in Paris at the end of November escalated with police officers using tear gas, being violent towards the press and turning tents upside down with people inside. Responding to the incident, the French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin said the images - shot by journalists - were "shocking" and demanded a report on the police operation.

One of the most violent physical attacks recorded on Mapping Media Freedom happened in France on 27 February 2021. Christian Lantenois, a photographer for the regional daily L'Union was seriously injured by a group of individuals - using his camera as a weapon - as he was covering unrest in a district in Reims. There is little doubt that he was targeted for taking photos of gangs about to clash with each other. He was hospitalised and spent one month in intensive care. His family has recently announced that he was no longer in a coma, but his condition remains a serious concern.

The nature of each of these threats highlights the toxic atmosphere surrounding the work of journalists in France, putting media professionals on the ground at serious physical risk.

Serbia

7 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

The situation of press and media freedom in Serbia remains of great concern, although the number of recorded cases decreased from 14 in the previous report to 7 in the current reporting period. Data show that threats, intimidation, hate speech and attempts to discredit journalistic work are widespread, both online and offline. During this period, several journalists were repeatedly targeted. According to our observations, many threats are not always taken seriously and are not thoroughly investigated by the authorities.

Death threats and threats of violence were the most frequent attacks recorded during the four-month monitoring. As the previous report pointed out, attacks against the press often do not stop with threats and can translate into violent attacks in real life. In late January, Nova.rs news portal journalist Vojislav Milovancevic received insults and life-threatening messages from several Twitter accounts following the publication of an article referring to a rape case at the Orthodox Theological Faculty. Previously, Milovancevic had been physically attacked while covering demonstrations in Belgrade. Similarly, TV N1 journalist Zaklina Tatalovic received a message stating "you will be beaten" among other threats and insults via Instagram. Tatalovic, too, had previously faced threats and sexist insults on live television and social media. In December, Juzne Vesti staff and their children received death and rape threats under the comments section following the publication of a report.

What is striking is the little consideration for investigative journalism from various sides of society, be it politicians or the general public. In late December, N1 journalist Jelena Zorić was reportedly threatened by the lawyer of a defendant as she was covering a historic drug raid trial. After Zorić reported the incident to the Criminal Police Directorate, the lawyer, Svetislav Bojić, initiated a criminal complaint against the journalist for the offence of false reporting and lying about the threat. Bojić also asked the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) in Serbia to impose a temporary broadcast ban on N1 TV for 30 days over what he called an "unprecedented media chase" against him. In another case, in November, following his reporting on cases of similar vandalism, Dinko Gruhonjić, the editor-in-chief of the Vojvodina Investigative and Analytical Centre, and his family were targeted by far-right hate speech: Their building's entrance was sprayed with graffiti glorifying a convicted Serbian war criminal, Ratko Mladić, as a "Serbian hero".

Attempts to discredit journalists and intimidate TV networks also occurred in the national parliament. TV channels N1 and Nova S were qualified as "anti-Serb media", "domestic traitor" and "foreign mercenary" while covering a parliamentary session by deputies of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). They went on with various slanders which were broadcasted live, revoking rhetorics from the region's war-torn 1990s. As stated by the Independent Journalists Association of Serbia: "Targeting the media, journalists and other public figures in the National Parliament that are broadcast live on Serbian Radio and Television creates a hostile environment that in extreme cases leads to death and physical threats."

Serbia, under the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić, has become a country where such acts are common. The spread of government-tolerated fake news, clashes between politicians and media and the frequent use of hate speech make journalistic work ever more difficult.

The Netherlands

7 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

Working as a journalist in the Netherlands is not as safe as it used to be. The situation significantly worsened in the second half of 2020. October was marked by a wake-up call which was triggered by the decision of the public broadcaster NOS to remove logos from their vans, following a rise in recent attacks against the staff by individuals. The MFRR strengthened its monitoring ofthe country in the last quarter of the project and made contact with the local monitoring platform Persveilig, which was launched in November 2019 by the Dutch journalists' union NVJ, the Association of editors-in-chief, the Police and the Public Prosecution Service to support journalists who encounter violence in the course of their work..

Four incidents took place as part of the protests and riots which were triggered in reaction to the new COVID-19 measures. In particular, the weekend of 24-25 January 2021 and the following days were marked by violent clashes in a number of Dutch cities after the government announced the introduction of a curfew, the first since the end of World War II. Reporters were threatened, intimidated, abused and physically assaulted. Two journalists, in Tilburg and Haarlem were pelted with stones by groups of individuals. Despite the new preventive measures taken by NOS, which include the protection of reporters by security guards accompanying TV crews, the reality on the ground is not very encouraging, with the latter also being targeted. In Urk, a corrosive substance – probably pepper spray – was sprayed on the security guard's face who required medical treatment on the scene.

The physical attacks, which are mainly coming from private individuals, follow a narrative more and more present in some spheres of the society whereby the news media are biased, "lying" and spreading "fake news". NOS in particular was targeted twice on social media with threatening videos accusing the public broadcaster of attempting to "fool" people and, in another case, calling on journalists to

"flee the Netherlands" before "something will be done to them".

Explicit threats of violence were also present in the Netherlands. On the morning of 27 December, a hand grenade was found in front of journalist Jos Emonts' property, as he returned home. The crime reporter for De Limburger was quickly evacuated, as well as his neighbours. It is assumed it is connected to his journalism work. In reaction, the editor-in-chief of De Limburger said: "that's the worst thing you can experience as a reporter".

These threats and intimidation are worrying examples of what journalists have to go through because of their work. Most of the time the attacks are taken seriously by the authorities thanks in part to the formal partnership between the police and the journalists' organisations.

Country-by-Country Anaylsis (IPI)

Greece

11 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

Media freedom in Greece continued to pose growing concern for press freedom organisations between November 2020 and February 2021, during which time it had the third highest number of alerts in the MMF platform. Police remained the primary source of violations, with excessive force against journalists covering protests an increasingly worrying phenomenon. Arbitrary detention has also remained a common tactic by police to intimidate media workers. During the reporting period, journalists documenting protests by far-left groups against the New Democracy government were particularly at risk. New rules restricting journalists' movement during protests, later reversed, posed additional concerns. The MFRR monitored more incidents linked to journalists' reporting on the refugee crisis on the Greek islands, with freelancers facing the greatest challenges.

In Athens, sporadic protests over issues such as government reforms and COVID-19 measures posed risks for journalists. In December, several photojournalists covering a demonstration were harassed, pushed with riot shields and obstructed as police attempted to disperse demonstrators. Documento photojournalist Mario-Rafael Biko was detained while covering another protest in February. A week later, a group of police officers assaulted the photojournalist Yannis Liakos, throwing him to the floor and kicking him. Numerous incidents in Athens also occurred as journalists covered far-left protests in support of convicted terrorist Dimitris Koufontinas. On 22 February, the offices of Greek TV station Action 24 were firebombed and attacked with stones by Koufontinas' supporters.

In January, the Ministry of Civil Protection launched a new plan for policing protests that included curbs on journalists reporting from within the crowds at protests and instead restricting them to demarcated areas that would be approved beforehand by police. After an outcry from journalists' groups, the Ministry clarified the rules and pledged to amend the document.

Journalists covering issues related to refugees and migrants continued to face obstruction from authorities. On 17 November, three German freelance journalists reporting on the landing of refugees and the possible illegal "pushbacks" by authorities on Lesbos were detained for several hours and interrogated before being released without charge. On 2 December, Italian freelancer photojournalist Danilo Campailla was also obstructed and unjustly interrogated while documenting operations at Mytilene Port following the sinking of a ship carrying refugees. On both occasions, authorities intimidated the journalists, searched their camera equipment and repeatedly refused to provide legitimate grounds for the detention.

In December, two well-known journalists announced they were resigning from their positions at leading newspapers citing pressure from the government. On 13 December, Elena Akrita, a columnist at Ta Nea resigned alleging that a report which investigated the assets of members of the government had been "censored". Days later, leading Greek journalist Dimitra Kroustalli announced that she had been forced to resign from the newspaper To Vima following "strangling pressure" from the cabinet of the PM following a report she wrote about the government's COVID-19 test and trace system.

Poland

8 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

Media freedom in Poland continued to deteriorate during the reporting period as the Polish government intensified its efforts to weaken independent media. Over the last four months, Poland had the fifth highest number of documented alerts. While not fully reflected in the MMF, during this time the capture of regulatory bodies by the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party was used to diversify pressure on a handful of independent media outlets that PiS views as "oppositional". Meanwhile, PiS allies heading a state-controlled energy company oversaw the first major purchase of a foreign-owned media company, solidifying indirect control over the country's regional press. PiS' sway over regulatory and competition bodies was used to block unfavoured mergers of critical media. November saw a clear increase in violence by police against journalists covering protests and the arrest of a photojournalist.

The Polish government achieved a major step in its efforts to gain control over the country's press when the state-controlled oil refiner PKN Orlen purchased Polska Press from German company Verlagsgruppe Passau. The deal handed the state-controlled firm ownership over more than 20 regional dailies, 120 weekly magazines, 500 online portals and access to 17 million readers. Such an acquisition of a media company by a state energy firm is unprecedented within the EU and led to immediate fears

of censorship ahead of the 2023 local elections.

Independent media took another blow when in January, Poland's competition regulator the Office of Competition and Consumer Protection (UOKiK) blocked the purchase of radio broadcaster Eurozet by media house Agora SA. Agora denounced the decision as a selective and politically motivated move to stymie its business interests. Press freedom groups see the decision as another example of the government's ongoing abuse of regulatory bodies to undermine the influence and growth of critical media houses. Agora SA is the owner of leading daily newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza, a staunch PiS critic.

Several large-scale protests in Poland over the reporting period also posed risks for journalists' safety. In November, several journalists and photojournalists were injured by police officers as they covered violent protests during the Independence March in the Polish capital Warsaw. Among those injured were Tomasz Gutry, a 74-year-old photojournalist for Tygodnik Solidarność, who had to undergo surgery after being shot in the face with a rubber bullet by a police officer. Photojournalists including Renata Kim, Przemysław Stefaniak, Adam Tuchliński, Jakub Kamiński and Dominik Łowicki were also hit by police, despite being clearly identifiable as members of the media.

Heavy-handed policing spiked when on 23 November police arrested photojournalist Agata Grzybowska as she documented another protest in Warsaw. She was detained for three hours for "violating the physical integrity" of a police officer before being released without charge. Earlier that month, police charged Gazeta Wyborcza journalist Angelika Pitoń with using indecent words towards them and not wearing a mask. The charges were dropped days later. In January, two photojournalists working for Gazeta Wyborcza, Jędrzej Nowicki and Maciej Jaźwiecki, were pepper sprayed by police officers as they covered a protest event in central Warsaw.

Spain

7 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

Between November 2020 and February 2021, the MMF observed a marked increase in the number of alerts in Spain. Though press and media freedoms in Spain remain relatively strong overall, increasing polarisation, politically divisive elections in Catalonia, and protests over the government's COVID-19 measures led to seven alerts. The safety of journalists covering anti-lockdown rallies was a persistent worry. Other attacks on the media stemmed from protests in support of the jailed rapper Pablo Hasél and the right to freedom of expression. Monitoring showed that the majority of documented alerts came from protesters or other unidentified actors.

One of the main scenes for attacks on journalists were the protests in support of Pablo Hasél, which erupted in cities throughout Spain in February. The newsroom of the Barcelona-based newspaper El Periódico de Catalunya was damaged by pro-Hasél protesters, who smashed the windows and painted the door while shouting "manipulative Spanish press" and other anti-media slogans. The same day, two journalists covering a similar protest in Valencia, Mar Segura from À Punt and Sergi Pau from València Extra, were hit with batons by riot officers. Three days later, on 21 February, photojournalist José Mari Martínez of Basque media outlet DEIA was injured on the back of the head by a protester as he was covering a similar demonstration in Bilbao.

A second focal point for attacks on the media centred around the parliamentary elections in Catalonia. On February 7, photojournalist Joan Gálvez was shot at with non-lethal detonating ammunition from a metre and a half away by a police officer of the Mossos d'Escuadra. Video footage posted on social media shows the action was unprovoked and deliberate. Gálvez had been documenting an election campaign event in Girona by leader of the far-right party Vox, Santiago Abascal, and the resulting counter demonstrations. Gálvez was stunned by the pain in his eardrums and had to be taken to an ambulance by two officers. A week later, on 14 February, unknown arsonists damaged broadcasting property of the Spanish public broadcaster Corporación de Radio y Televisión Española (RTVE) in Catalonia, temporarily interrupting TV and radio broadcasts on the day of the election.

As in the previous reporting period, journalists also faced threats and intimidation while covering anti-lockdown protests. On 23 January, a reporting crew for La Sexta TV was verbally insulted and physically obstructed from carrying out their professional duties as they reported from an anti-mask protest in Madrid.

During the reporting period, several Spanish journalists and media directors were fighting civil and criminal lawsuits by the grandchildren of General Francisco Franco over an investigative report broadcast on TV station Cuatro in July 2018 which examined the origin of Spanish dictator's secret wealth and its inheritance. Franco's grandchildren demanded 50,000 euros compensation and that the film be destroyed.

Slovenia

7 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

Between November 2020 and February 2021, the government led by the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) continued its efforts to delegitimise and pressure the country's public broadcaster and press agency. The Prime Minister Janez Janša continued to use Twitter on a daily basis to demean critics. This included a high-profile attack on a journalist from Politico, leading to Europe-wide criticism. The Government Communication Office (UKOM) became a new instrument for furthering the Prime Minister's vendetta against the country's media. Monitoring showed that unlike other EU countries, in Slovenia the main source of media freedom violations was the government and politicians themselves.

During the reporting period, pressure on the Slovenian Press Agency (STA) increased significantly. In late February, UKOM announced it had suspended the financing of the agency for the second time in three months. The Slovenian Journalists' Association described the latest contractual dispute as another attempt by UKOM and its director Uroš Urbanija to destabilise the agency through financial pressure. International press freedom groups also raised concerns it was another front in the administration's efforts to undermine and weaken the agency, which has repeatedly come under fire from Janša for alleged institutional and editorial bias.

UKOM faced criticism again in February for trying to control the media narrative of the COVID-19 pandemic after TV Slovenija, the public broadcaster, reported that government officials and advisers were refused clearance by UKOM to appear on one of its news shows to comment on coronavirus testing. Both the Trade Union of Slovenian Journalists and the Slovenian Journalists' Association denounced the decision by UKOM as censorship.

The Prime Minister himself made headlines across Europe after he tried to discredit Politico and its journalist Lili Bayer, calling them "liars" over her report which examined the state of media freedom in Slovenia. The article was based on interviews with dozens of journalists working for the country's public media outlets and raised several concerns about the PM's social media use. Later the same day, the Slovenian Ministry of Culture published a tweet accusing Politico of "political bias" and making up a "phantom war on the media" in Slovenia. The PM retweeted this with a comment accusing the outlet of "lying for a living".

Safety of journalists also remained an issue. On 19 January, a photographer working for the Megafon.si news website was physically threatened and pressured to delete photos they had taken in Koper. The photographer had been on an assignment investigating how public institutions were managing the government's new rules on social distancing and face coverings. As the photographer finished their work and headed back towards the car, two men approached them and forcibly dragged them behind a nearby building, demanding they delete the pictures. After a crowd started to form, the perpetrators fled the scene but were later arrested.

Albania

7 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

In Albania, arbitrary detentions and alleged abuses against journalists while in police custody emerged as a major concern. Out of seven alerts documented, law enforcement officers were identified as being responsible for four. On two occasions, journalists were arrested after they took possibly incriminating images or footage of police using allegedly excessive force against protesters. A lack of accountability from the police was also an issue. During the reporting period, major lawsuits were launched against two news outlets which had reported on companies and individuals involved in the construction of incinerator plants in Albania, highlighting the risks journalists face from the country's civil and criminal defamation laws.

In mid-December, protests broke out over the fatal shooting by police of a 25-year-old man who had allegedly broken curfew restrictions. On 11 December, Qamil Xhani, editor-in-chief of Koha Jone, was arrested and beaten after photographing alleged rights violations by police officers in the capital Tirana. After he was detained, Xhani alleged he was hit on the head and back by officers and that police seized his phone and deleted the images. He alleges he was then pressured to sign a statement admitting he'd been detained for "participation in an illegal gathering". The same night, police also detained Xhoi Malësia, a news anchor at Ora News RTV, as he filmed excessive use of force by riot police officers. The journalist claimed he was beaten and insulted by officers while in custody and released only after signing a statement written by police.

After the protests spread to the coastal city of Durres the next night, Aldo Mustafa, a local journalist with Syri.net TV in the city of Durrës, was physically attacked by a police officer and obstructed from filming the detention of young protestors. The same night, Shefqet Duka, an editor at Durrës Lajm, was also detained by police in Durrës as he was returning home from the office and accused of participating in an illegal protest. Despite repeatedly identifying himself as a journalist, Duka remained in detention for three hours until police finally released him without charge.

During the reporting period, journalists continued to face hurdles in accessing information about the COVID-19 pandemic. One prominent case involved Fjona Çela, a journalist with Fax News television. Starting in February, she was barred from interviewing medical and public health professionals by the media advisor and spokesperson of the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MHSP). Çela said she had been repeatedly denied or ignored when making official requests to the Ministry's media advisor, depriving her of the right to access information and hampering her outlet's reporting on the pandemic.

Vexatious and intimidating lawsuits remain a threat to journalists in Albania. In November, two different media outlets were sued over their reporting on companies and prominent figures involved in the construction of an incinerator plant. In the first case, Albtek Energy filed a defamation lawsuit against freelance journalist and filmmaker Artan Rama over a story he published in the online publication Portavendore about Albtek Energy and Albania's Energy Regulatory Agency. Another lawsuit was launched against two journalists from Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), Aleksandra Bogdani and Besar Likmeta, by businessman Mirel Mertiri. The lawsuit sought damages and the retraction of the investigation.

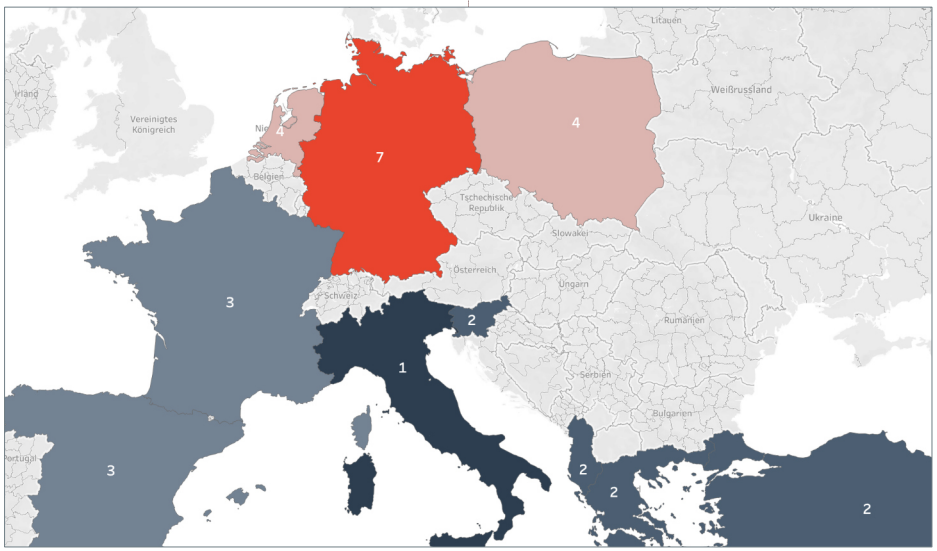
Cross-Regional Thematic Comparative Analysis

Physical violence (EFJ)

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: 30

The safety of journalists has become a top priority for the MFRR partners in view of the deteriorating situation in many European countries during the pandemic. The reporting period was marked by grave media freedom violations with 30 alerts documenting physical assaults on 66 media actors in 10 countries. Journalism practices were particularly affected in countries with significant COVID-19 related protests, such as Germany (7 alerts), the Netherlands (4) and France (3), but also in Poland (4 alerts) and Spain (3).

The data clearly demonstrate that protests are the main venue of physical violence against journalists and photographers with 20 alerts. As previously highlighted in several country reports, a growing hostility towards media professionals and a lack of trust in 'mainstream' media is reflected in very concrete terms in physical assaults, which are perpetrated by individuals as well as by police or state security. When the assaults did not result in injury (19), alerts described reporters being pushed away, shoved, stoned by protesters or hit with batons by the police. In Athens, at least 15 photojournalists covering a protest were targeted with disproportionate force by police officers equipped with riot-gear, shields and batons to try to disperse the media. Media professionals were identifiable but their ID, press vest or armband didn't protect them from being harassed, having their cameras touched and being tear gassed at close range. In Catalonia, a photojournalist dropped to the ground after he was shot from a meter and a half away in a deliberate and unprovoked action by a police officer with non-lethal ammunition. In the Netherlands, a journalist was pelted with stones and chased by a group of 15 people during a demonstration against the covid-19 curfew.



As a result, journalists are increasingly using protective equipment, such as helmets and masks, to protect themselves from the use of tear gas, batons and flash grenades. This choice, oftentimes reserved for conflict zones, requires media actors and outlets to ensure there is adequate funding in place for such equipment. This could establish yet another barrier to covering issues in the public interest. While the majority of physical assaults did not involve any injuries, it is important to underline that the physical risk and the psychological impact is likely to have serious consequences on the journalists' work in both the short and long term.

Twelve physical assaults resulting in light or very serious injuries were reported to Mapping Media Freedom, including that of Slovenian photojournalist Borut Živulović. He was covering violent protests in the capital when he was attacked and knocked unconscious by protesters. He was hospitalised for three days with a fractured jaw and required surgery. In France, another photographer, Christian Lantenois, working for the regional newspaper L'Union, was brutally attacked by a group of people shortly after he arrived on the scene to cover the tensions in a district of Reims, in a car identifiable as belonging to the newspaper. Lantenois, 65 years old, was left in great distress on the ground before being hospitalised in an intensive care unit for a month, fighting for his life. While at the time of writing he is no longer in a coma, he still suffers a head injury with serious long-term effects that cannot be assessed at present. The seriousness of the attack shook the entire profession in France, with voices saying the situation has been deteriorating lately. One month later, dozens of French regional and national daily newspapers published a column entitled "Let's protect freedom of information" in which they warned about the rise in violence against journalists. Everyday since the attacks on Charlie Hebdo, "journalists are increasingly targeted: verbal or physical attacks, threats, damage to property," they wrote, as a wake-up call, and demanded a comprehensive set of measures to be put in place.

The MFRR partners have been urging governments to live up to their commitment when it comes to guaranteeing the safety of journalists. It is clear that more work needs to be done to reverse the trend which further worsen because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

State Capture and Media Freedom (IPI)

One of the key factors in the continued decline in press and media freedom in several EU Member States and Candidate Countries within the last year has been the abuse of state tools and regulatory bodies to manipulate the media market and undermine independent media. In Hungary, Poland and Turkey, increasing control of ruling parties over state-controlled companies, advertising agencies, media regulators, competition watchdogs and even the courts, has allowed for a steady intensification and diversification of campaigns against critical press. Over time, the placement of government allies or loyalists at the head of these nominally independent institutions has blurred the line between party and state, multiplying the repressive apparatus wielded by the ruling parties. This increased political control or influence has resulted in many bodies being instrumentalised to slowly undermine critical press and distort the media landscape in favour of a pro-government narrative. In acting through supposedly independent bodies, ruling parties have also ensured plausible deniability against accusations of meddling or market distortion and provided governments a semblance of strategic distance from events, limiting the scope for potential EU action.

Over the last decade, tactics of this illiberal model for eroding media pluralism have been copied to varying degrees in different states monitored by the MFRR. The worst examples have been in Turkey, an EU Candidate Country, under the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and in Viktor Orbán's Hungary, where abuse of regulatory bodies have contributed to systematic declines in media freedom and the steady silencing of critical voices. Within the last year, the MFRR has documented how the Law and Justice (PiS) government in Poland has also begun to copy more and more aspects of this model, cherry picking parts that have been successful in Hungary, while also constructing Poland-specific mechanisms that work towards the same aim. The success of this populist playbook has encouraged other regional leaders to begin charting a similar course, including Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša.

While this trend is not immediately observable in the MFRR's daily documentation of violations, during the monitoring period key examples of the abuse of state entities were on display. Between September 2020 and February 2021, control over the system of media regulation in Hungary allowed the Fidesz government to force one of the country's last independent radio stations off air. In early February, the decision of the government-controlled Hungarian Media Council (NMHH) to block the automatic extension of the license for Klubrádió, the country's last major critical radio broadcaster, was approved. The regulator's decision barred the station from operating on its frequency, Budapest FM 92.9 MHz. This meant Klubrádió was relegated to broadcasting solely online from midnight on 14 February, effectively silencing one of the last critical outlets on Hungary's airwaves ahead of the 2022 elections. The Media Council justified its decision on grounds that Klubrádió had violated the media law by twice failing to provide simple information on its programming content – justifications dismissed by Klubrádió and international press freedom groups as absurd and disproportionate.

In recent years, the same regulator had slowly stripped Klubrádió of its licenses outside the capital, confining it to Budapest. In February 2021, a Hungarian court then dismissed the appeal by Klubrádió for an emergency license. Finally, in April it was announced that the regulator had then awarded the tender for the frequency to a station owned by a group close to the Prime Minister, Spirit FM. This approval was granted despite the fact that Klubrádió's legal appeal process was still ongoing. Taken together, the fate of Klubrádió provided a stark example of how the capture of different state and regulatory bodies can be used to stack the deck against an independent outlet and shut off all available options for remaining on air. This clearly violated rules and principles protecting media pluralism and fair competition and illustrated the importance for the ruling party with having regulators and courts under political control. During the monitoring period, similar discriminatory rulings were made by Turkey's broadcast regulator, the Radio and Television High Council (RTÜK), against several television stations over content critical of the government and its allies. Fines were issued by the regulator against Halk TV, Habertürk, Tele 1, KRT and Fox TV over either the contents of news or comments made during their programmes. In Turkey, major independent news outlets providing critical coverage of the AKP government have long been closed or taken over.

In another example of the abuse of regulatory bodies, in January 2021 Poland's competition watchdog blocked the merger of two major independent radio broadcasters. The Office of Competition and Consumer Protection (UOKiK) blocked the purchase of radio broadcaster Eurozet by the independent Agora media group, whose outlets are critical of the government. MFRR partners raised concerns over the independence of the regulator, which has launched an unprecedented number of antitrust investigations into liberal-leaning media in Poland. In addition to using media regulators to stymie the businesses of "adversarial" media, PiS also appears to be adding new tools for administrative harassment to its arsenal.

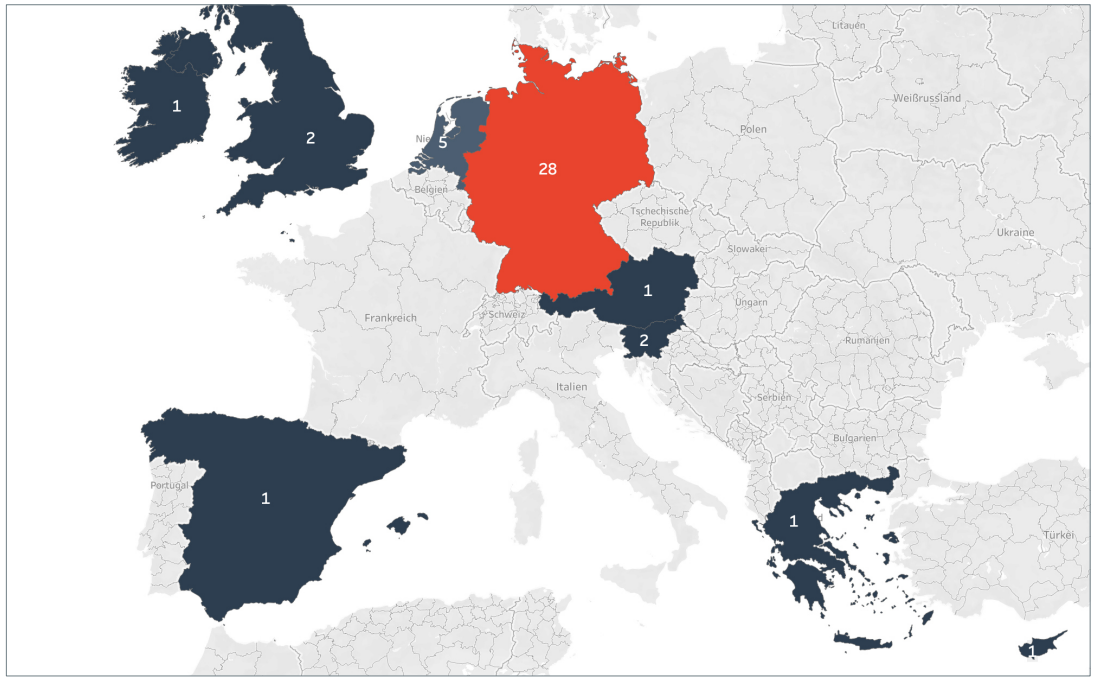
The clearest example of the use of a state entity to further the political agenda of PiS in Poland, however, came when regional newspaper publisher Polska Press was bought by the state-controlled oil giant PKN Orlen, a company headed by a key ally of PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński. The purchase of the group from German Verlagsgruppe Passau handed PiS indirect control over 20 regional dailies, 120 weekly magazines, 500 online portals and an estimated 17.4 million readers ahead of the 2023 local elections. A purge of critical voices like that undertaken at the public broadcaster TVP in 2016 is expected to follow. Such an acquisition of a media company by a state energy firm is unprecedented within the EU and was met with strong criticism from EU institutions.

Unlike the merger of Eurozet, in this case the acquisition by PKN Orlen was swiftly approved by the competition regulator UOKiK, drawing further accusations of politically-motivated decision making.

In Turkey, Hungary and Poland, the placement of loyalists into the boardrooms of state-owned or controlled companies also meant that during the monitoring period independent media continued to be subjected to the abuse of state subsidies and advertising budgets. Under all three governments, the system of advertising by state companies has been distorted to channel money away from independent titles to those reporting favourably on the government. This carrot-and-stick approach starves critical media of advertising revenue and rewards alignment with the government narrative. This has meant that some outlets have tempered their criticism of the government in return for greater advertising revenue. Independent media are often boycotted from advertising altogether in all three states. Taken together these various examples of the abuse of state and regulatory bodies pose a serious challenge to media freedom in the MFRR monitoring region and will require an enhancement of the EU's toolbox for defending the free flow of information and pluralistic media environments across the bloc.

COVID-19

The MFRR started around the same time as COVID-19 reached Europe. As the pandemic necessitated a wide range of measures, both from national governments and European institutions, the impact of the pandemic is significant and long-lasting. A development that coincided with this report is the emergence of a number of different vaccines that promise a potential route out of the pandemic. While this only currently offers the hope of eventual recovery, it encourages us to evaluate the lasting impact of the pandemic on every facet of European society and this includes the states' relationships with media outlets and the public.



This hope of a roadmap has not diminished COVID-19's impact on media freedom. In fact, during the reporting period, more than 1 out of 4 incidents (28.6%) on Mapping Media Freedom were related to COVID-19. Beside new and unique media freedom violations, a number of trends that we documented in previous reports continue to be present during the reporting period. Central to this is the continued protest actions aimed at opposing state responses to the pandemic. Of all alerts related to COVID-19, More than 1 in 3 incidents (34.7%) happened during a demonstration or protest. A country of concern on this issue is the Netherlands where a number of protests and riots broke out across the country, which resulted in a number of concerning media freedom violations. Earlier in 2020, the Dutch public broadcaster, NOS had to remove all logos from its vans due to harassment and interference from protests as the journalists reported from the sites of protests. This abuse continued and escalated after a security guard accompanying a NOS camera operator was attacked by protesters in Urk after a COVID-19 test centre run by GGD was set on fire in late January. Three days prior to this, NOS filed a complaint against COVID-19 activist and former candidate for Almere city councillor, Ronald Laken in regards to a film calling on NOS journalists to 'flee the Netherlands' because something will be 'done' to them. NOS were not the sole focus of attacks against journalists, as a number of other media actors were assaulted and pelted with stones for covering a riot instigated via snapchat.

A significant flashpoint in violations at protests in relation to COVID-19 was a series of Querdenken (Lateral Thinkers) protests that took place in a number of German cities and towns including Leipzig. The significance of these types of protests cannot be overstated. 84.9% of all Mapping Media Freedom incidents in Germany in the reporting period were related to COVID-19 and 81.8% occurred during protests. In total, MMF has recorded 20 alerts related to one protest; A protest in Leipzig on 7 November. It also gives a precise picture as to the nature of alerts that can be found during protests. A large number of journalists were physically attacked, especially after the police broke up the main protest in Augustusplatz. This included a journalist being injured after being chased by protesters, an assault that took place in front of the

Leipzig central train station by a group of individuals, and an attack on a group of 12-15 journalists who were reporting on the protest by a group of around 100 people. This threatening environment also extended to verbal harassment that targeted journalists with threats of being hanged, cleansed and accused of being complicit in the Holocaust. This was underpinned by a significant anti-media sentiment throughout protesters. However, they were not the sole sources of threats.

Throughout the protest and in the aftermath, police officers actively prevented journalists from being able to carry out their work. For example, police officers prevented journalists reporting from Leipzig Central Station and recorded details about the reporters, alleging, incorrectly, that they required permission from Deutsche Bahn and the management of the specific station. However, this requirement is waived if the media actor has a press card. At different locations throughout the protest, police actions directly interfered with the ability of journalists to move freely, with a number reverting to threats to reinforce their dominance. A number of police officers, when clearing Augustusplatz after the main protest had been broken up, threatened a number of journalists who remained in the area. One of the journalists reported that a police officer present said "We don't differentiate between protesters and journalists". The police officers also threatened to initiate legal proceedings against the journalists because they were not complying with Leipzig's anti-COVID-measures.

The use of COVID-19 regulations to restrict media work has been seen in other countries, such as the UK, where, although journalists are classed as key workers, a number have been threatened with fines or arrest for covering protests. This disproportionate response and the unwillingness to differentiate between journalists and media workers represents a severe risk to journalists who often have to depend on police for protection. Another example from the Leipzig protest represents how this untargeted approach to policing the protest undermines media freedom. Police officers told journalists to stop taking pictures with a telephoto lens because this might provoke the demonstrators. One said: "If you are already using my protection to take pictures of the "Querdenken'' demonstrators, don't provoke them by using big telephoto lenses, or should I record your personal data preemptively?" Blaming the journalists for encouraging provocative actions, instead of ensuring protection was forthcoming places the onus of protection on the journalists themselves. This added burden could be a very strong incentive for journalists to step away from coverage.

The entire COVID-19 crisis has revealed the vital importance of journalists being able to share independent, robust and factual public health information to the broader public. This is oftentime made possible by state authorities and public health representatives delivering press briefings and Q&A sessions with a diverse media pool. However, throughout the reporting period, a number of states established arbitrary or targeted restrictions that attacked this principle. On 18 February 2021, local newspaper Thüringer Allgemeine reported that one of its journalists has been banned from accessing city council meetings and will no longer receive any information from municipal administration of the town Stadt An Der Schmücke in apparent retaliation for previous reporting. Other countries established less targeted but similarly damaging barriers. In Ireland, Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly held a press briefing on the logistics around the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out where a number of reporters and political correspondents were refused access. It was later reported that the refusals were based on the outlets not having a health correspondent. The arbitrary barrier, reinforced by the fact that many of the reporters denied access had been covering other aspects of the country's COVID-19 strategy also endangered access for smaller or local outlets who may not be able to staff a dedicated role.

In Slovenia, this manipulation of access also worked the other way around with public authorities and spokesperson being denied permission to media outlets. In February 2021, it was reported that the Government Communication Office (UKOM) had "forbidden" officials from providing answers to the media or giving interviews. This also extended to denying a number of state officials, including Bojana Beović, head of the advisory group at the Ministry of Health, the Education Minister Simona Kustec and Milan Krek, director of the National Institute of Public Health from appearing on TV broadcasts. When information is not forthcoming, uncertainty grows. This enables mis/disinformation and propaganda to take root and guide public opinion and perception moving forward. The COVID-19 pandemic has been labelled an 'infodemic' by the World Health Organisation and ensuring factual information can be shared with media outlets is an important step to counter this threat. However it is a step too often ignored or undermined by states that see independent media outlets as bodies who cannot be trusted or as 'the enemy'.

If these threats and the foundation that made them possible are ignored or underestimated the relationship between the state and media actors will be irrevocably damaged. As soon as independent reporting is presented as undermining a collective emergency effort such as tackling the COVID-19 pandemic, or journalists themselves painted as enemies, the opposition or traitors, there is a significant risk that this pandemic will be established as a blueprint for future emergencies. This requires meaningful intervention to prevent this occurring.

Conclusion

The three monitoring reports published as part of the inaugural year of the MFRR present a complex and evolving media freedom landscape. While no one group of perpetrators or types of threats monopolise attention across Europe, these reports, taken together, demonstrates a region that frustrates attempts at simple categorization. However, key themes have emerged and run as a connective thread between the reports.

The impact of COVID-19 on media freedom is undeniable. Beyond direct public health risks for actors who require unfettered abilities to travel, access information and engage with different stakeholders across society, the pandemic has demonstrated how pliable the relationship is between the state, the public and media actors. This is the lasting legacy of COVID-19 and a legacy that requires constant vigilance and proactive protections to guard against. Whether this means the curtailing of freedom of information laws and regulations, how dis/misinformation and propaganda is identified and protected against, the ability to use state relief or ad revenue to reward friendly outlets, or the channeling of frustration towards government responses to the pandemic that results in physical or threatened violence meted out against journalists by members of the public, whether in the street or during protests.

The hope is that this landscape will vanish when the emergency situation subsides. The immediate and direct impact of COVID-19 on media freedom across Europe has been significant and severe enough on its own basis. However, a central concern is that the legislative and regulatory frameworks established in European countries, and by European institutions to tackle the pandemic will continue to be in effect after the direct impact of the pandemic passes. This could establish a 'new normal', which would be defined by curtailed access to information, policy makers and sources, unpredictable state aid or funding redirected to friendly outlets and insubstantial police protection that could make covering protests too dangerous for media outlets to risk. This report demonstrates the importance of building a 'new normal' that strengthens and values media freedom, which would be underpinned by a detailed, open and transparent evaluation of this period. This would help all stakeholders to understand the flaws, gaps and issues that arose across Europe as the first step towards establishing a road map and set of learnings for all future emergencies that ensures media freedom is protected as a mechanism by which democratic principles can be protected even during times of upheaval and uncertainty.

The rise of right-wing populist regimes in a number of European countries has signaled an increase in a range of both simple and sophisticated ways to undermine media freedom. This includes smear campaigns directed at journalists and outlets by policy-makers and other influential stakeholders, punitive restrictions on access and funding and the co-opting of regulatory and commercial decisions to undermine independent media outlets and with them, hollow out the broader media landscape that is necessary to ensure media freedom can flourish. These different threats also represent a significant challenge when designing and developing mechanisms and strategies to address these issues. How can you guard against the selling of media outlets to pro-government businesses or individuals, without an understanding of the underlying regulatory and competition foundation and how can we guard against the awarding of state ad revenue without knowing the state of media pluralism and independence?

The three monitoring reports have also traced the expansion of a pronounced anti-media sentiment that has fueled distrust and anger towards media outlets and actors across the MFRR region. This is the groundwater that has fed the proliferation of offline and online harassment and has fueled organised smear campaigns and attempts to discredit robust reporting. These reports also demonstrate the importance of monitoring verbal threats directed at journalists and media workers. Robust monitoring ensures the scale of these threats can be accurately analysed, while also contributing to the necessary work to tackle the normalisation of these types of threats by media actors as an expected 'part of the job'. If left unaddressed, verbal threats do not fade away, they can establish a template for future harassment or set the ground for further escalation. We only need to remind ourselves of the campaign of harassment against Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta prior to her murder to understand the importance of mitigating the impact of verbal threats for all journalists and media workers.

Each trend and theme outlined in this report requires a nuanced, tailored and specific approach, each undergirded by a meaningful commitment to media freedom, the resources necessary to move pledges into action, as well as the political commitment to ensure this is a long-term and considered process. While each country identified in this report is shaped by specific national, political, commercial and social contexts and therefore requires specific remedies and protection mechanisms, a broader understanding of media's role and importance within functioning modern and pluralist European democracies needs to be reiterated by all national governments and European institutions moving forward.

MEDIA FREEDOM RAPID RESPONSE

European Centre for Press & Media Freedom | Article 19 | European Federation of Journalists | Free Press Unlimited
Institute of Applied Informatics | International Press Institute | Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa

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