



**MEDIA FREEDOM  
RAPID RESPONSE**

# **MAPPING MEDIA FREEDOM**

**MONITORING REPORT – 2021**





## 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](http://www.mfrr.eu)



[Mapping Media Freedom](http://www.mappingmediafreedom.org) (MapMF) is a platform which documents press and media freedom violations across Europe. The new [Alert Explorer](#) shows the incidents on a map, as a list, or as a detailed alert report. It allows sophisticated filtering and helps to gain insights into the state of press and media freedom. MapMF is a crowdsourced platform that enables anyone to report attacks and threats against journalists and media workers across Europe via the user-friendly [ReportIt](#) form. Every alert is verified by the monitoring partners before publication. The network is made up of the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), and the International Press Institute (IPI), as well as an international network of local partners. Alerts recorded on the platform guide the work of the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) to directly engage with and help at-risk journalists and media workers.

[www.mappingmediafreedom.org](http://www.mappingmediafreedom.org)

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## Introduction

Attacked while covering demonstrations, harassed online for reporting on COVID-19 and measures to fight it, or sued by private companies trying to avoid publication of damaging information. These are just some examples of the threats received by journalists and media workers in Europe in 2021.

The current monitoring report for the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) has focused on summarising media freedom violations across EU Member States, candidate countries, and the United Kingdom from January until December 2021.



Throughout the reporting period, 626 alerts were documented on Mapping Media Freedom (MapMF), ranging from verbal attacks

to legal incidents. 1,063 individuals or media entities in 30 countries were subject to one or more press freedom violations, including the murder of 3 journalists.

2021 was marked – as the previous year – by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, in 2021, more than 1 in 4 incidents (26.5% of the alerts) were linked to COVID, a figure comparable to the one in 2020 (27.7%). The second year of the pandemic started with the deployment of vaccines and growing unrest over confinement measures and health certificates to access public spaces. Protests

against the implementation of these policies increased, and in some cases, journalists covering them became a target and suffered violent attacks, as explained in the thematic section of the report.

Most media freedom violations took place at demonstrations, where 178 alerts were recorded, 28.4% of the total. While not all of these attacks were linked to the pandemic, those countries with weekly COVID protests such as Italy and Germany experienced several attacks on journalists covering these events. It is important to note that the high number of alerts in Germany should not be directly attributed to a deteriorated media freedom landscape but to an extensive monitoring network in the country which is not yet as extended in other states. There was an increase in attacks taking place online – extensively covered in one of the thematic sections of the report – which rose from 14% of alerts in 2020 to 16,7% in 2021.

As for types of attacks, the most common ones included were verbal attacks (41.1%) such as intimidation, harassment or insults, followed by legal incidents (25.4%), physical attacks (21.1%), attacks to property (11.8%), and censorship (11.3%) such as arbitrary denial of accreditation or registration. In fact, in 2021, these types of censorship incidents increased to 5.3%. Surveillance incidents, with 2.1% of alerts in 2021, were quantitatively a minor topic

but – as the Pegasus files have shown – they affected journalists in several countries, as explained in the thematic section on online attacks. Attacks perpetrated by private individuals accounted for 41.2% of the alerts, a rise compared to the same number in 2020 (37.7%). They were followed by attacks by police (18.5%) and legislation (12.3%).

The current report is divided in 4 main sections which offer quantitative and qualitative analysis of the main attacks perpetrated against journalists and media workers during the year. The first section provides a general picture and includes visualisations and statistics that summarise the data and explain the main findings of the monitoring project. The analysis is followed by thematic reports focusing on two of the most relevant topics spotted by the monitoring partners throughout the year: attacks and threats linked to COVID-19 and online attacks. The third section focuses on country studies from the following states: Germany, Turkey, France, Italy, Serbia, Slovenia, Poland, Greece, the Netherlands, Spain, Albania, Montenegro, and Hungary.

The 2021 report has also added a new final section focusing on positive developments for media freedom that took place during the year, such as the creation by the European Commission of a new Expert group on Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) or the start of consultations for the upcoming

European Media Freedom Act, officially announced by President Ursula von der Leyen in her State of the Union address.

The report has been compiled by the International Press Institute (IPI), the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), and the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), in the context of the joint Media Freedom Rapid Response project which monitors and supports journalists, media workers, and platforms that have been threatened. The Media Freedom Rapid Response was launched in March 2020. Past reports can be downloaded on the [MapMF](#) and [MFRR](#) websites, and the alerts for this report can be accessed through the [Alert Explorer](#), which is constantly updated and collects and visualises all alerts documented by the monitoring partners. Furthermore, an additional [Fact Sheet focusing on European Union Member States](#) was published in parallel.

# Overview

**626** Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts in 2021

This chapter provides an overview of the different issues faced by journalists and media actors in 2021. Each alert documented on Mapping Media Freedom is classified based on a detailed category system, including the type of attack, type of aggressor (source), and the place (context) in which the attack happened. Through the analysis of these aspects more information about the characteristics of the attacks can be revealed, which provides deeper insights into the situation of press and media freedom and its trends.

410



PHYSICAL &  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
THREAT

159

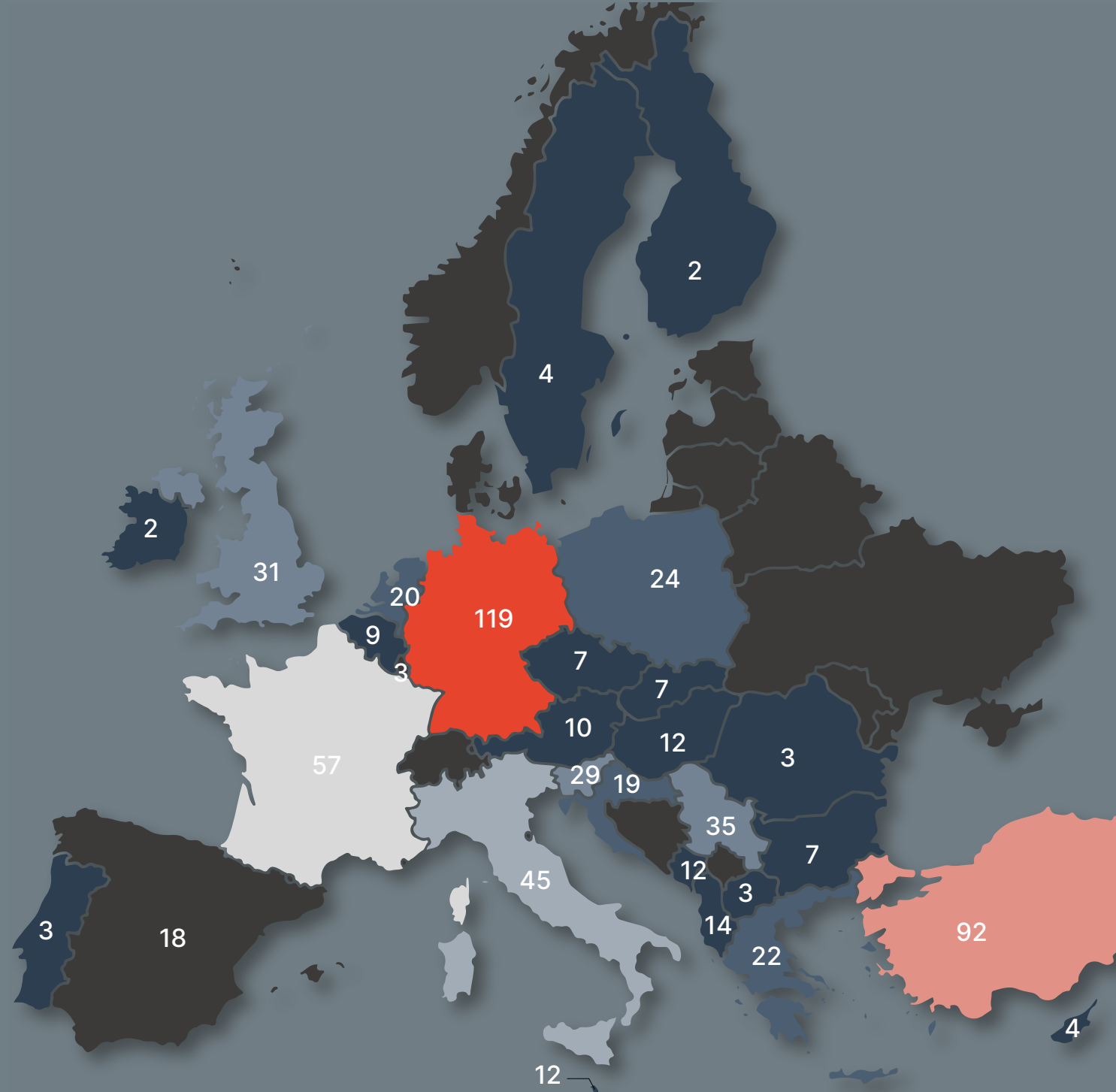


LEGAL  
THREAT

71

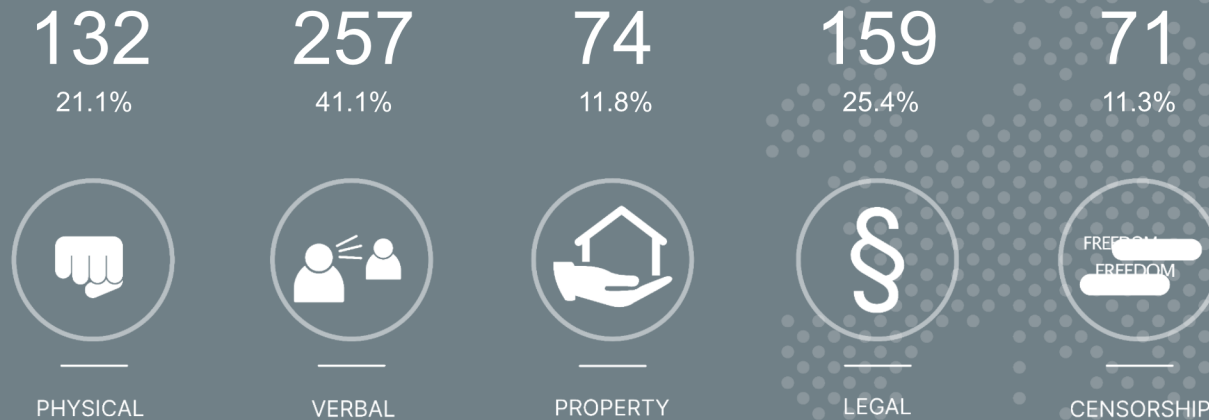


CENSORSHIP



\*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

# MAIN TYPES OF ATTACKS



Journalists and media actors face several different types of attacks. Sometimes they even face several types of attacks at the same time, such as a verbal and a physical attack performed within the same incident by the same aggressor. In this section we show how many alerts involved a certain type of attack. The types of attacks are grouped into 5 main types with detailed information provided below.

**Physical:** In more than 1 out of 5 incidents (21.1%, 132 alerts) media actors were physically attacked. In 49 incidents (7.8%) media actors were injured. Three journalists were killed: the investigative journalist [Peter R. de Vries](#) in the Netherlands, the television reporter and veteran crime reporter [Giorgos Karaivaz](#) in Greece, and the local radio presenter [Hazım Özsu](#) in Turkey.

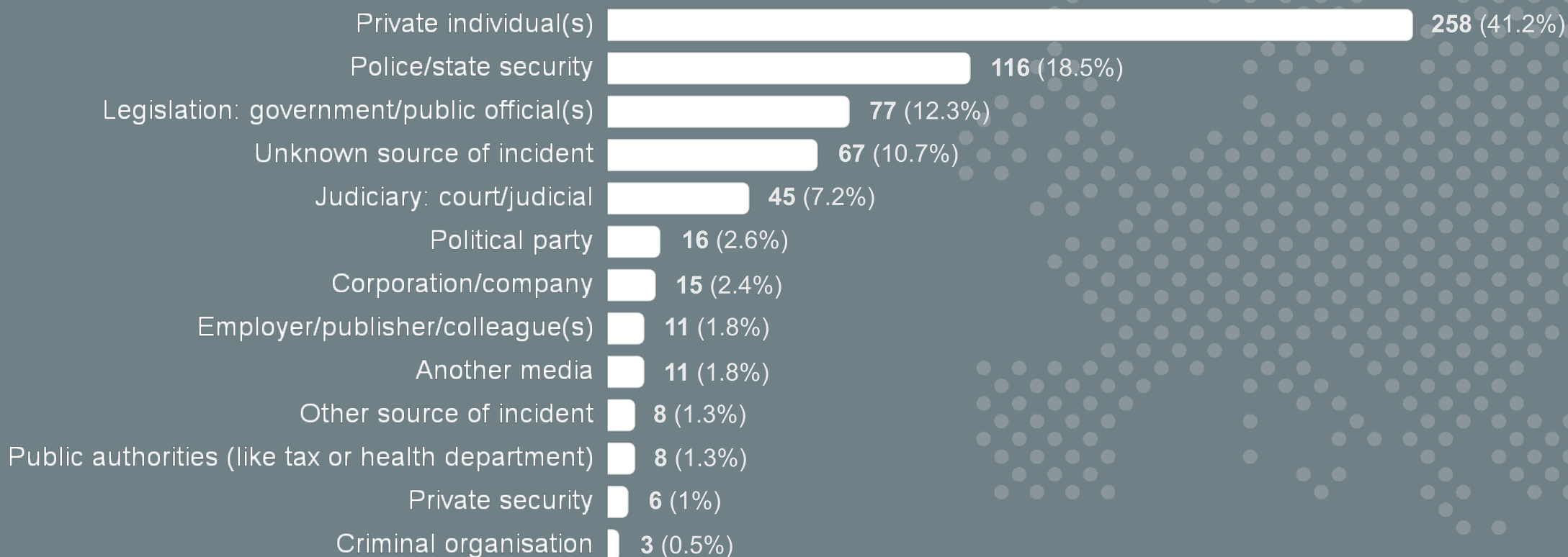
**Verbal:** In more than 4 out of 10 incidents (41.1%, 257 alerts), media actors were verbally abused. This includes intimidation/threatening (25.2%, 158 alerts), insult/abuse (78 alerts), discrediting (32), harassment (24), as well as bullying/trolling (10) targeting media actors.

**Property:** In more than 1 out of 10 incidents (11.8%, 74 alerts), property was attacked. This includes equipment (45 alerts), personal belongings (4 alerts), but also attacks to other property such as cars or houses (21), as well as hacking/DDoS attacks (6 alerts).

**Legal:** In one quarter of all incidents (25.4%, 159 alerts), media actors faced legal consequences. This includes civil lawsuits (33 alerts), arrest/detention/imprisonment (31), criminal charges (24), interrogation (19), legal measures like laws restricting press and media freedom (18), surveillance and interception of journalistic data (13), conviction (9), loss of employment (8), defamation (5), violation of anonymity (3), expansion of state outlets (1), or bribery/payments (1).

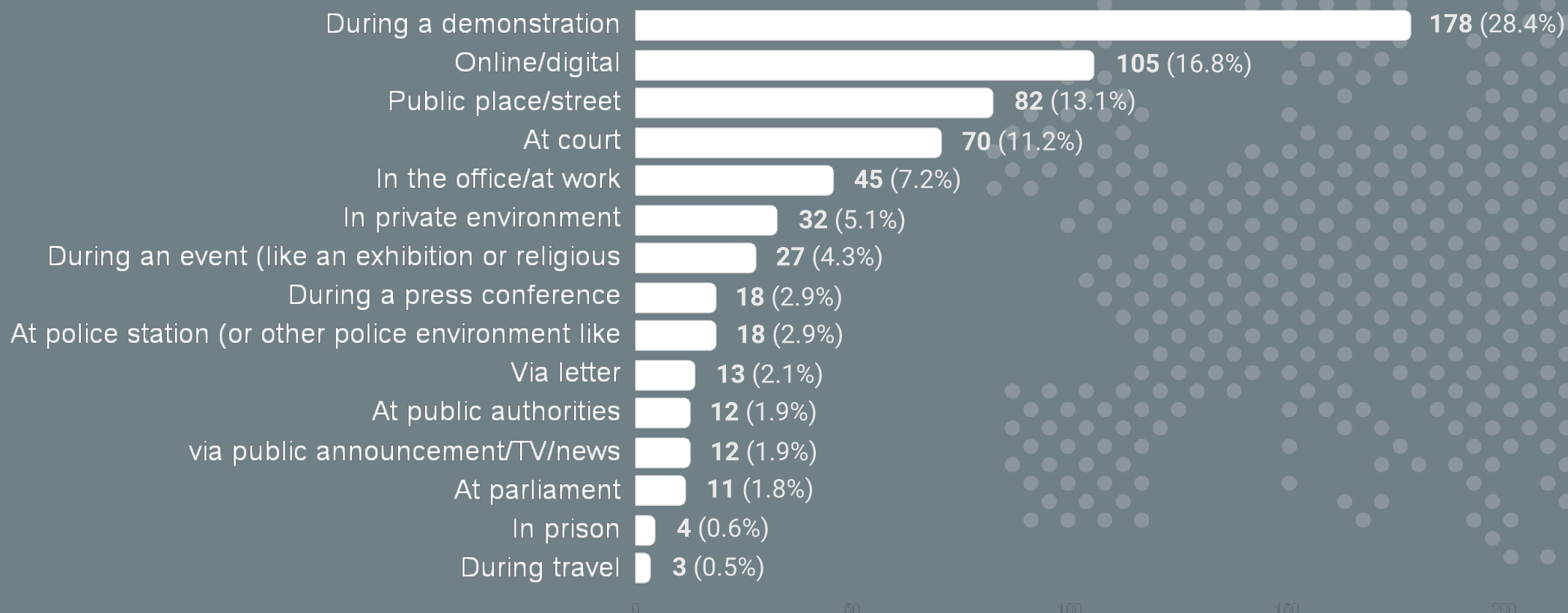
**Censorship:** In more than 1 out of 10 incidents (11.3%, 71 alerts), media actors faced censorship. This includes arbitrary denial of accreditation or registration (incl. blocked access to events or press conferences) (33 alerts), blocked access to information (e.g. blocked websites or no answers to enquiries) (24 alerts), commercial interference (13 alerts), disinformation (3), and journalistic work not being published (2).

# SOURCES OF ATTACKS



This data reflects all alerts documented by Mapping Media Freedom between 01 January 2021 and 31 December 2021 for EU member states, candidate countries, and the United Kingdom, as recorded on 17/01/2022. – One incident, and thus alert, can include multiple types of attacks (e.g. a verbal and physical attack which has taken place within the same incident). A single incident documented by Mapping Media Freedom may also affect more than one journalist or media actor and may have been performed by more than one type of perpetrator. In particular, legal incidents where journalists or outlets receive multiple related or similar legal threats at the same time are currently recorded as one alert.

# CONTEXTS OF ATTACKS



This data reflects all alerts documented by Mapping Media Freedom between 01 January 2021 and 31 December 2021 for EU member states, candidate countries, and the United Kingdom, as recorded on 17/01/2022. – One incident, and thus alert, can include multiple types of attacks (e.g. a verbal and physical attack which has taken place within the same incident). A single incident documented by Mapping Media Freedom may also affect more than one journalist or media actor and may have been performed by more than one type of perpetrator. In particular, legal incidents where journalists or outlets receive multiple related or similar legal threats at the same time are currently recorded as one alert.

# THEMATIC ANALYSIS

## Attacks linked to COVID-19



166

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts in 2021

Media freedom in Europe continued to face major challenges in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this twelve-month reporting period, the MapMF platform documented 166 different media freedom violations linked in some way to COVID-19. These involved attacks on 252 different persons or entities in 19 countries. Many of these alerts involved physical and online attacks on journalists reporting on anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown protests across Europe. Sixteen cases were recorded which involved serious attacks on journalists or media workers who then required medical treatment. Overall, more than a quarter of all alerts (26.5%) recorded during 2021 were related to the pandemic, underscoring the persistent threats that the pandemic faces to independent journalism. The respective COVID-19 related alerts can be viewed [here](#).

These attacks on the free press came in many forms. Nearly one in three incidents (31.9% – 53 alerts) involved physical at-

tacks, including 16 incidents (9.6%) where journalists and media workers were injured. More than half of the incidents (56.6%, 94 alerts) involved verbal attacks, such as intimidation, threats, and abuse, both online and offline. The MapMF also recorded 29 alerts (17.5%) where journalistic property was attacked, including the damage or theft of equipment such as cameras and mobile phones, in addition to vandalism and attacks on newsrooms. While a smaller number of alerts (3.6%) were legal threats, these included some serious incidents in which journalists or media outlets faced civil lawsuits or criminal sanctions for their reporting on the pandemic. A further 13 cases involved censorship or interference by governments in the free flow of news about the pandemic.

A key trend in the alerts was that the vast majority (76.5%) of COVID-19-related attacks were carried out by private individuals, in most cases those supporting anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine, and anti-green pass causes. In contrast, police or other state security forces were responsible for only seven documented alerts. Many of these did, however, involve serious incidents, including arrests and [raids](#) by police on journalists' homes. Meanwhile, eleven cases were recorded in which the government or public officials were the source of the threat. [Examples](#) of the latter involved political figures [verbally attacking](#) indi-

vidual journalists or media organisations over their critical reporting on the government's handling of the virus. Other cases involved accusations of government [interference](#) in COVID-19 news broadcasts or instances in which certain journalists were [blocked](#) from attending pandemic press briefings. In a major case in Hungary, journalists were systematically [barred](#) from hospitals or from interviewing medical professionals about the virus and its toll on the country's health service.

In terms of location, almost two thirds (108 alerts, 65.1%) were documented at protests and demonstrations, as journalists were trying to cover events. Numerous cases of physical violence and intimidation were documented at these protests, where anti-press sentiment was highest and journalists were frequently targeted by anti-vaccine groups. On multiple occasions, these attacks disrupted live broadcasts. Protests in Italy and Germany stand out in terms of the number of alerts involving threats and intimidation against the media. The MapMF also documented 10 incidents in which journalists faced attacks at the office/at work (10 alerts), mostly in cases where newsrooms were targeted. High profile cases involved the [storming](#) of the building housing Sigma TV Station's headquarters in Nicosia, Cyprus, when protesters vandalised the building and threatened the media workers on site. In Slovenia, anti-vaccine protesters [broke into](#) the headquarters of the public broadcaster RTV Slovenija, disrupted broadcasting, and harassed staff. An additional 13 violations took place in a public place. Other violations took place at court, where health precautions were

used to [ban](#) journalists from attending trials and other public interest hearings.

Eighteen cases were documented involving serious threats or intimidation against journalists online, including death threats. These figures included the increasing practice of [doxxing](#), whereby journalists' addresses or other private information was shared online. The majority of online threats were made on social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook. It is important to note that MapMF figures on COVID-19-related online harassment do not capture the scale of online abuse suffered by journalists reporting on the pandemic. These kinds of insults and smears against journalists online are carried out by anti-vaccine groups on a daily basis and are impossible to record. Many of the most serious cases go unreported, as journalists increasingly view this hostility online as part of the job.

Certain EU Member States and Candidate Countries saw far more COVID-19 related attacks than others. States with larger and more frequent protests against lockdowns and vaccines tended to experience more violations. Germany and Italy, where demonstrations occurred on a near weekly basis throughout the year, both saw large numbers of attacks on journalists. Those countries in which far-right groups were a common feature in anti-vaccine protests, also tended to see more frequent attacks on the press. Other EU states not used to physical attacks on journalists, such as the Netherlands and Austria, also registered a worrying spike in cases due to COVID-19. Overall, compared to the first year of the pandemic,



166

26.5%



COVID - 19

related to the Coronavirus /  
COVID-19

#### Who was attacked

Not only were attacks on media actors such as journalists, media workers, and media companies recorded, but also 7 incidents involving attacks on family members of media actors, 5 incidents for associations like trade unions or NGOs fighting for press freedom, and 3 incidents for journalists' sources because of their cooperation with media actors.

when more media freedom violations documented by MapMF were the result of knee-jerk restrictions and lockdown policies by governments which negatively affected the media, the bulk of violations in 2021 came from the hostility towards the press by anti-vaccine groups.

In 2021, MapMF data therefore indicated a shift away from pandemic-era government restrictions on the media, mostly linked to lockdowns, towards a backlash against the media reporting on vaccination campaigns. This hostility towards mainstream media manifested itself most frequently at protests. In many countries, these demonstrations are becoming increasingly unsafe places for journalists to report from. MapMF data therefore underscores the threat to journalists' safety, both online and offline, posed by such extreme anti-vaccine groups. It also illustrates the extent to which disinformation and conspiracy theories spreading online can become a direct threat to the pillars of democratic society, in this case a free press.

## Online and digital attacks



105

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts in 2021

The number of attacks taking place online and digitally has increased over the last year, from 14,0% in 2020 to 16.8% in 2021. They occurred in 23 countries and affected a total of 154 media companies, journalists, family members, and journalistic sources. Slovenia, with 13 cases, was the most affected country within the period, followed by Turkey (12), Serbia (10), and the United Kingdom (10). The respective alerts for all attacks performed online and digitally in the year 2021 in MFRR countries can be viewed [here](#).

An increasing number of threats sent via email, on social media, or websites were reported as awareness around this issue grew. Journalists' and media freedom organisations have been warning of the mental health consequences of such threats on media professionals who may feel isolated, at risk, or defenceless in the face of such violent events. The MFRR identified a large majority of the cases (85) as harassment and psychological abuse. This ranges from threatening messages – particularly prominent [in Serbia with 10 alerts](#) – to insults, trolling, and attempts to discredit journalists or their work. In [Malta](#), for example, a massive disinformation campaign targeted six independent media outlets and blogger

Manuel Delia, creating spoof websites spreading untrue facts and sending fake emails to newsrooms.

Women journalists were more likely to be attacked and harassed online, including sexual or family-related comments. In the United Kingdom, Telegraph journalist [Cammilla Tominey](#) received threats on her website with mentions of her children and husband. In Spain, [Maria Tikas](#), a sports journalist for Diario Sport faced numerous sexist and misogynistic insults on social media after she tweeted about a football player. In Italy, journalist [Silvia Bergamin](#) directly quoted in more than 60 Facebook comments containing sexist insults and words such as “prostitute”.

The most frequent source of attacks were private individuals (40). In 28 cases, the source was unknown at the time of writing the alerts, meaning it could not be clearly identified if there was a private individual or any group or organisation behind the attack. There was a significant number of alerts (18) documenting attacks from public figures in high-ranking positions actively contributing to the creation of this toxic environment.

This phenomenon was particularly common in Slovenia, where the Prime Minister (PM) Janez Jansa regularly used his official and private Twitter accounts to express his dissatisfaction with a publication or the little consideration he has for journalists. The country's press agency, [STA](#), was targeted multiple times during a contractual dispute opposing it to the government, with Jansa and the director

of the government communication office (Ukom) accusing STA management of lying, breaking the law, and hiding documents. The rhetoric is that media professionals critical of government policy are “not telling the truth”. On Twitter again, Janez Jansa accused daily news show [24ur](#) and its editor-in-chief of “persistently lying” about the COVID-19 pandemic and significantly contributing to the death toll in the country through its reporting. In [Slovakia](#), the former Prime Minister and current leader of the opposition party, SMER, wrote on Facebook that Aktuality.sk's editor-in-chief was “overwhelmed with hatred and stupidity”, adding that his staff were “just a bunch of hired servants”. In [Luxembourg](#), a politician shared an investigative journalist's contact details in an anti-vaccination Telegram channel. The action, known as “doxxing”, led to a wave of threats, intimidation, and insults by users of the group.

Besides harassment and intimidation, journalists and their sources were exposed to surveillance in eight cases, notably in relation to the Pegasus scandal which broke in July 2021. In [Hungary](#), [Belgium](#), and [France](#), a dozen journalists and media outlets were targeted by the Israeli spyware according to Forbidden Stories' investigations. In two other cases, data such as location, contacts details, and journalists' conversations were collected in order to track down journalistic sources under the pretext of contributing to ongoing judicial investigations. In Italy, at least seven journalists had their phones [wiretapped](#) by Sicilian prosecutors who were seeking to establish links between sea rescue NGOs' alleged complicity in

people smuggling and illegal immigration in the Mediterranean. In Portugal, for two months, four journalists were under surveillance. Their personal communications were accessible to the police, without authorisation, as part of a wider investigation into high-level leaks related to the so-called [E-Toupira corruption case](#). In [Poland](#), a Gazeta Wyborcza reporter was stalked and smeared – pictures were taken near his house and a recording of the journalist’s phone call with a source was published – following his investigations into the so-called “Wroclaw scheme”.

The number of hacking and DDoS attacks remained relatively low, with five cases reported. Two cyber-attacks were related to reports about a local businessman’s alleged links to drug trafficking in Cyprus. The [Nuri Silay](#) and [Özgür Gazete](#) newspapers were targeted with millions of requests that caused them to crash. The hacking followed intimidation attempts, threatening calls, and pressure to take down the articles in question. It lasted for 15 days. In [Spain](#), five media websites were rendered inaccessible or very slow for users for several days because of multiple DDoS attacks in late November.

While cases of surveillance, cyber-attacks, and blocking access to online information still represent a small minority, the many cases of harassment, intimidation, and death threats are of great concern. Online violence requires as much attention as offline threats. It is clear that the impact it has on the journalists’ professional and personal lives must be taken seriously, as they may be the first steps towards “real world” violence.

## Analysis of selected countries

### Germany



**119** Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts in 2021

In 2021, 119 alerts were recorded in Germany, involving a total of 223 attacked persons or entities related to media. Again, the country is by far at the top of the EU Member States and Candidates countries in terms of reporting. While the high number of alerts can partly be explained by the strength of the MFRR network in Germany, it clearly confirms a trend in the deterioration of press and media freedom, especially when it comes to the coverage of demonstrations, as repeatedly [emphasised by the MFRR](#). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of violent protests multiplied and the frequent participation of hooligans and right-wing extremists in such anti-COVID rallies led to various attacks. With 92 violations, over 77% of the alerts took place during protests. In the vast majority of cases, attacks were carried out by private individuals (63.9%, 76 alerts). Citizens’ low regard towards the journalistic profession and decreasing trust in traditional media are certainly correlated with the increase in violence.

The most common types of attacks during protests were physical assault, with a total of 35 alerts, 8 of which resulted in injury, and intimidation/threat with 31

alerts. Threat to equipment (20), insult and abuse (11), and harassment (9), were also frequently recorded incidents in this context. While the majority (68) of these violent demonstrations were against COVID-19 measures and vaccination, right-wing extremist and leftist protests emerged to be hazardous as well. Acts of police violence against media workers were recorded especially during left-wing and climate activists’ demonstrations (18 alerts).

At demonstrations, private individuals were the source of 69 alerts. Journalists were often attacked by protesters who consider traditional media as messengers of the government’s propaganda and enemies of their movement. Particularly during Querdenker demonstrations, media workers were [intimidated](#) and [insulted](#), their [equipment hit](#), and [physically assaulted](#). In one brutal incident, [two journalists were beaten up](#) by neo-Nazis in December during a Querdenker demonstration in Berlin. In August, the regional manager of the German Journalists Union in Berlin-Brandenburg, Jörg Reichel, was [assaulted and injured](#) by Querdenker demonstrators. Previously, Reichel’s name and photo had circulated in relevant Telegram channels. It is well known that Reichel reports on attacks against press freedom, particularly during protests across Germany, via Twitter. His outspoken support for media workers made him a visible target for proponents of anti-media sentiment.

Because of this hostile environment, media teams now often go to such demonstrations [with security guards](#). While this might create a safer environment for

journalists, the MFRR also recorded six cases where those accompanied by security staff were attacked. [Antisemitic slurs](#) or [attacks](#) and several recorded [offensives by right-wing extremists](#) further demonstrate what kind of mindsets lead to aggressions against the press. Also, politicians from the right-wing AfD and the centre-right CDU party reportedly [discredited, insulted, and excluded](#) journalists from reporting.

Police or state security were the source of 27 press freedom violations in Germany in 2021. 23 of these alerts were recorded during protests, which confirms that the police frequently respond inappropriately to media workers’ presence at demonstrations. Journalists, media companies, and journalists unions have been raising this issue for a long time: Strategic de-escalation and unhindered press work are desirable, in contrast to the reported [physical violence](#), tedious press card [checks](#), and journalists’ [expulsions](#). Better police training for such chaotic environments and mutual understanding between media workers and police are vital to improve the situation. Initiatives on how to better protect journalists and to improve the relationship of police and press have been developed. The [Police Codex](#) developed by ECPMF defines directives to be used by the police when dealing with journalists in all EU member states and has been published in German, English, and French. Furthermore, Germany’s Journalists Union and Association developed the [code of conduct](#) for media houses and an [informative flyer](#) for police officers.

## Turkey



**92** Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts in 2021:

Media freedom in Turkey remains the worst of the countries monitored by the MFRR, with continued and systematic repression of independent journalism. Over 170 media outlets have been forcibly closed since 2016 and at the time of publishing, 38 journalists [remain behind bars](#). MapMF recorded 92 alerts in Turkey in the year 2021, involving 153 attacked persons or entities related to media. In addition to physical violence, police pressure and crippling fines by regulators, civil lawsuits, and criminal sanctions in the courts create an extremely hostile climate for watchdog journalism. Violations monitored during the year represent the tip of the iceberg of the ongoing and widespread attack on media critical of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Legal persecution remains the most pervasive threat and made up nearly half of the recorded attacks (49%). Criminal charges related to the alleged dissemination of propaganda and terrorism-related crimes are common sanctions used for imprisoning journalists. Nearly a quarter of MapMF alerts during 2021 (24%) involved court cases. In April, for example, journalists Müyesser Yıldız and İsmail Dükel were sentenced to prison over their critical reporting on the military operations of Turkish armed forces in Syria. In June, managing editor of the Bursa Muhallif online news site, Ozan Kaplanoğlu, was also sentenced to one year and ten months in prison for report-

ing on statements against Turkish military operations in Syria in 2018. Other journalists, such as dokuz8NEWS' chief editor [Gökhan Biçici](#) faced charges of “insulting” President Erdoğan through their journalism. Persecution is not limited to Turkey's borders. In early November 2021, four journalists working for the Greek newspaper Dimokratia were [prosecuted](#) by Turkey's General Prosecutor for the crime of “insulting” Erdogan in a front-page article. Delays to trials caused by the pandemic also saw 83% of journalists' trials in 2021 [adjourned](#) to a later date.

Media also face arbitrary detentions and police raids. In total, police and law enforcement were responsible for over a third (34%) of MapMF alerts. In January, police stormed the offices of the Etkin News Agency and detained journalist [Pinar Gayip](#), who was already facing a criminal trial. In September, police detained A3 Haber editor-in-chief [Süleyman Gençel](#) at his home in Izmir. Possession of articles written by banned media outlets has even been used to imprison journalists. In March, [İsmail Çoban](#), a journalist with a now-closed pro-Kurdish newspaper who has been imprisoned since 2018, was sentenced to an additional two years after articles of another banned newspaper were found in his cell. The articles were cited as criminal evidence and Çoban was sentenced for “bringing illegal /banned items into the prison facility”. In July, two journalists were [detained](#) in hospital after being beaten by a mob following demonstrations on the racially motivated murder of a Kurdish family.

Journalists also faced physical attacks and threats of violence from private individuals. The most extreme case occurred in March, when local radio host [Hazım Özsü](#) was shot dead in his Basra home by a man who later said that he disliked Özsü's comments regarding religious values. In March, [Levent Gültekin](#), a columnist and programme host at Turkey's Halk TV, was assaulted by a mob of around 25 people outside the station, likely over his criticism of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). In January, [Orhan Uğuroğlu](#), a Turkish TV commentator and Ankara correspondent of the newspaper Yeniçağ, was attacked outside his home in Ankara when three men tried to run him over in their car. He escaped without serious injuries. In September, journalist [İdris Yayla](#), the owner of the Jiyan News newspaper, received explicit death threats over the phone the same night as shots were fired outside of his apartment in Batman. In December, an official of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) physically attacked journalist [Özcan Saraç](#) on the street in Konya. [Online harassment](#) and intimidation, particularly of women journalists, remains common.

Multiple other alerts were linked to coverage of protests and demonstrations, where journalists face constant threat of [arrest](#). MapMF documented 11 serious violations at protests. In February, Sendika.org reporter Murat Bay was [punched by a police officer](#) while recording injuries to protesters. In July, journalists Büşra Taşkıran and Berna Kişin were [physically assaulted](#) by the police while covering demonstrations at Sincan Prison. In November, Artı TV's [Bilal Meyveci](#) was

beaten and wounded due to excessive use of force by the police, despite repeated attempts at showing his press card. To compound problems further, in April the General Directorate of Security issued a directive banning all audio-visual recordings of Turkish police by citizens at protests, sparking concerns the rules would affect the ability of photojournalists to cover protests and expose police brutality. On multiple occasions, journalists have had their equipment damaged, confiscated, or had photos deleted by police, who act with near total impunity.

Turkey's government-controlled media regulator, the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), continued to be used as a tool to sanction and fine media outlets in a discriminatory manner. In May, it issued a fine against Exxen TV for a broadcast featuring the country's first openly trans model. In August it issued a [written warning](#) to Turkish TV stations over their coverage of wildfires. In September, access to the news website JinNews was blocked three times in a week by the regulator on the order of a Turkish court. In October, the regulator imposed a fine on broadcaster [Halk TV](#) on the grounds that it “insulted” a pro-government foundation. Government ministers continue to openly smear and accuse the media of publishing so-called “fake news” and spreading lies, fostering a climate of hostility towards critical media. In December, Mesopotamia News Agency's verified Facebook page which had over a hundred thousand followers was [removed](#) by Facebook, despite the news agency's repeated complaints against the platform.

## France



**57** Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts in 2021

In France, MapMF recorded 57 alerts in 2021, involving a total of 87 attacked persons or entities related to media. The situation has worsened against the backdrop of the start of the presidential campaign, despite the calming down of debates and protests over the Global Security Bill and National Policing Plan, which caused a high number of incidents in 2020 (see [previous reports](#)). With 27 alerts, harassment and psychological abuse towards journalists and media workers were the most frequent violations in 2021.

Fourteen [physical assaults](#) (24.6%) were recorded on Mapping Media Freedom, seven of which resulted in injuries. One of the most violent and shocking physical attacks happened in February 2021: [Christian Lantenois](#), photographer for the regional daily L'Union, was severely injured by a group of individuals who used his camera as a weapon as he was taking photos. The main suspect, a 21-year-old man, is being prosecuted for "attempted murder" and "failure to assist a person in danger." He has been remanded in custody pending trial.

While a majority of alerts concern journalists and editors (43), photographers, camera operators, or journalists holding cameras are increasingly targeted because of the visibility that their equipment gives them. In March, a journalist for France 3 TV was violently [assaulted](#) as she was about to carry out an interview in

a marketplace where a rally against health measures had been planned. While trying to hit the camera and intimidate the journalist, the person ended up injuring her face. In June, [three](#) media workers (a journalist, a cameraman, and a sound recorder), all working for daily news programme Quotidien, were physically assaulted by a celebrity while filming an interview. The cameraman was punched in the face and hit in the head, as the attacker was using the headset as a weapon in order to prevent the journalists from continuing the interview. In October, a [TV crew for M6](#) was making a report on a drug trafficking case, filming in the streets in Normandy, when a group of fifteen people assaulted the journalists. The attackers started hitting the car in which the journalists found refuge with iron bars and stones. In [Martinique](#), a TV crew for BFMTV, a photographer, and a photojournalist were filming when they were shot at three times in a row by two men on motorbikes. None of the journalists were hurt as they were able to get into their car and drive away.

Nearly half of the attacks (27 alerts, 47.4%) were perpetrated by private individuals while the number of alerts involving law enforcement authorities amounts to 10 (17.5%) – they mainly concern coverage of events such as blocking access to events or protests, with police preventing journalists from covering the news. Sixteen cases occurred in the context of COVID-19, most of these during or related to demonstrations against COVID-19 measures and vaccination, where journalists were obstructed in their work, intimidated, threatened, insulted, verbally

abused, or even physically attacked. The first tensions were observed at political rallies as the campaigns for the presidential election started in late November 2021. They exclusively concern rallies organised by former journalist and far-right candidate Eric Zemmour, whose supporters do not see the press in a good light.

Five cases document threats and attacks against journalists of foreign origin based in France. While it is difficult to confirm, it seems that most of these 5 attacks were coming from abroad. The most serious one involved Azerbaijani dissident and blogger, Mahammad Mirzali, who was [stabbed](#) 16 times by six people while walking down the street in Nantes. He was subsequently the victim of another [series of threats](#), following public appearances in the media. He is reported to have left the country. Three more threats from abroad referred to the Pegasus scandal, named after the Israeli spyware which surveilled [six French journalists](#) from four different media outlets. According to Forbidden Stories' revelations, Moroccan secret services had purchased the Israeli software to spy on the journalists. A few days later, Morocco filed several complaints against [Forbidden Stories](#), [Amnesty International](#), Le Monde, Mediapart, and Radio France for [defamation](#).

Disturbing threats were made to three female journalists [Nadiya Lazzouni](#), [Morgan Large](#), and [Christine Kelly](#). Lazzouni received anonymous death threats via the post when a handwritten letter was sent to her home. Large found her car – parked near her house – sabotaged with two bolts removed from a wheel. Both reques-

ted police protection, which was eventually refused. CNews TV presenter Christine Kelly was threatened with death several times during the month of November via emails and text messages containing reference to Eric Zemmour, a former colleague of hers.

It is also worth mentioning that four media outlets were targeted in retaliation for their editorial policy: [La Dépêche du Midi](#), a regional newspaper in Toulouse was the target of an arson attempt and the national daily [Le Monde](#) lost an advertising campaign commissioned by oil giant Total worth €50,000 following an article revealing the company's collusion with local military in Myanmar. Regional newspapers Le Dauphiné Libéré, l'Est Républicain, and Radio France Bleu Belfort Montbéliard also had their premises targeted and damaged by anti-vaccine demonstrators.

## Italy



**45** Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts in 2021

In Italy a major concern for media freedom in 2021 was the safety of journalists reporting from anti-vaccine and anti-green pass protests. MapMF recorded 45 alerts, with 72 attacked persons or entities related to media. Hostility against the press including multiple serious physical attacks were documented by MapMF, with some journalists badly injured. Intimidation and harassment of journalists by anti-vaccine groups, both online and offline, was widespread, worsening an already dangerous climate for journalist's safety. Meanwhile,

vexatious lawsuits and SLAPPs targeting media outlets and threats against individual journalists from organised crime groups remain major concerns.

[Attacks](#) and threats against journalists covering COVID-19-related protests were documented across the country, from Bologna and Florence to Rome. Overall, 36% of all alerts in Italy in 2021 were recorded at demonstrations, with 47% of all cases linked in some way to COVID-19. Leading newspapers and the public broadcaster were routinely accused of spreading lies and “fake news” about the pandemic. In August, [Francesco Giovannetti](#), a video journalist for *la Repubblica*, was threatened with death and punched in the face by a protester during an anti-green pass demonstration in Rome. In October 2021, [Alessandro Serrano](#), a photojournalist working for daily newspaper *la Repubblica*, was attacked with a shovel by an anti-vaccine protester in Romet. In November, [Gianpaolo Sarti](#) from newspaper *Il Piccolo* was headbutted by a protester while he was documenting the “no green pass” demonstration in Trieste. MapMF also documented cases of targeted online abuse by anti-vaccine groups. In October, [Giovanni Balugani](#), a journalist for *Gazzetta di Modena*, became victim of online harassment by anti-vaccine trolls.

Surveillance of journalists also emerged as a serious issue when in March 2021, it was revealed that numerous Italian journalists had their phones [wired](#) by Sicilian prosecutors in Trapani as part of their investigation into sea rescue NGOs and charities. Prosecutors recorded

dozens of conversations between journalists and NGO workers, breaching source anonymity. Media freedom groups said the move was one of the most serious attacks on the press in recent Italian history. Concerns over source protection increased further in June after the Lazio regional administrative court issued a [ruling](#) ordering the investigative programme, Report, to reveal its sources for a report on the management of public funds in the Lombardy region.

Physical attacks and intimidation of journalists remained a concern. MapMF recorded seven cases in which journalists suffered serious injuries. In April, journalist Carmen La Gatta and her TV crew were reporting on illegal occupation of houses in the north-western city of Cuneo when they were [attacked](#) by a man wielding a metal chain. In October, an envelope containing a [shotgun cartridge](#) was sent to the editorial offices of RAI in Florence. In October 2021, [Michele Sardo](#) from Palermo Live was attacked and left unconscious by two men while documenting a fire that had broken out near a petrol station. Threats to journalists’ safety from organised crime groups remain a major issue in Italy, where dozens of journalists remain under police protection. In an example of these threats, in June police discovered that a convicted mafia boss had [instructed](#) his son to “silence” journalist Marilena Natale. In October, it was revealed that award-winning investigative journalist [Sigfrido Ranucci](#) had been placed under strengthened police protection after it was discovered that a plot had been hatched by a jailed drug dealer to hire people to kill him.

Online harassment and threats against media, especially women journalists, remains an engrained problem. [Silvia Bergamin](#), of *Il Mattino di Padova*, was subjected to a wave of sexist insults and called a “prostitute” on Facebook after writing about a drug-charge arrest. Threats from far-right groups resurfaced in March when Carlo Verdelli, chief editor of one of Italy’s most well-respected newspapers, *La Repubblica*, was placed under police protection after receiving repeated threats from neo-Nazi groups. In October, journalist [Annalisa Cuzzocrea](#), a correspondent for daily newspaper *la Repubblica*, was subjected to a torrent of abuse and harassment online after the leader of the Brothers of Italy party posted a tweet about her.

MapMF also documented other forms of legal pressure on the media. In September, the online newspaper *Fanpage.it* received a [legal notice](#) from a court in Rome that ordered the media outlet to remove from its website videos of an investigation it conducted into a well-known case of embezzlement involving the Lega Nord. Vexatious lawsuits remain a major issue. In July, the newspaper *Domani* received a letter by [ENI](#), the partly state-owned oil company, demanding that it pay €100,000 within 10 days, otherwise ENI would sue the newspaper and claim for damages to its reputation in court. In October, Guardian correspondent [Lorenzo Tondo](#) received notification of the official start of his trial for two civil lawsuits brought against him by Italian prosecutor Calogero Ferrara.

## Serbia



**35** Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts in 2021

Serbia is the candidate country with the second highest number of alerts, following Turkey. In total, 35 attacks affecting 55 persons or entities related to media were registered in the reporting period. As evidenced by the MFRR fact-finding mission organised in January and February 2021, media professionals continue to operate in a highly polarised environment. The data confirms the findings of the [mission report](#), published in April 2021. Verbal attacks, intimidation, online harassment, and legal threats are the main issues affecting journalists in the country.

The country’s political and ethnic polarisation is reflected in attacks against journalists who critically report on the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) or [President Vucic’s family](#). Various cases show that radical nationalism endangers the safety of journalists. Pro-government media were the source of – or incited – attacks against journalists in five cases, for instance by [discrediting](#) critical media outlets or [filing a civil lawsuit](#) against four independent media and an NGO after publishing an analysis of fake news in tabloids. Such targeting by pro-regime media also resulted in online harassment, as was the case in October 2021, when the tabloid, *Informer*, reported about *Nova.rs* journalist Pero Jovic’s Facebook post with his location in Pristina with three Kosovo flags. The pro-regime tabloid marked him as a “traitor and foreign mercenary”, which triggered numerous [insults](#)

[and even death threats](#), revealing how unresolved Belgrade-Pristina relations affect journalists. In addition, [in three cases](#), journalists covering topics related to the war criminal Ratko Mladic were attacked.

Of particular concern were cases of politicians and officials fueling hatred and polarisation instead of creating a safe and enabling environment. At the beginning of 2021, far-right politician Vojislav Seselj made [misogynistic comments and discredited](#) journalist Natasa Miljanovic-Zubac working for Radio Television of Republika Srpska. In December 2021, TV N1 reporter Milan Nikic [was insulted and threatened](#) by SNS party members during the municipal budget session of Batocina. The fact that powerful politicians attack media workers may lower people's inhibitions to do the same, particularly online. In 10 cases, journalists were [harassed and intimidated](#) via social media or text messages, including five death threats.

Next to the online environment, [demonstrations](#) (7) are the second most common place where journalists are attacked. In all these cases, private individuals are the source of attack, showing citizens' low regard towards media workers. In two incidents, journalists were [verbally assaulted](#) or [pelted with eggs](#) by hostile protesters against vaccination campaigns. Environmental protests emerged to be a dangerous environment as well. In four cases, media workers were attacked during protests over the two new laws on referendums and expropriation, which environmental organisations and the political opposition claim favour business and are linked to the Rio Tinto company's plans to

open a lithium mine in western Serbia. Also connected to these protests, starting in November 2021, N1 television staff received [threats online](#) and the police [searched, interrogated, and intimidated](#) in order to prevent Vranje News' local reporter, Milena Dimic, from covering these protests.

With eight alerts, including [two SLAPP lawsuits](#), journalists continue to struggle with legal obstacles, particularly those covering crime or investigating businesses. The well-known investigative and non-profit 'Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project' (OCCRP), via its Serbian partner KRIK, is regularly targeted for its reporting through multiple [lawsuits](#). Plaintiffs using court proceedings to discredit critical reporting generally do not even challenge the facts. The case of The Millennium, a Belgrade-based construction company, is a telling example. It filed lawsuits against six media outlets, asking for €100,000 each as compensation for reputation and material damages. Another example of huge damages claimed concerned the TV channel N1, which is being [prosecuted](#) for "untrue information" and "negative" media coverage of the commercial agreement between Telenor mobile services provider and state-owned company, Telekom Serbia. Telenor was asking for almost €1,000,000 in damages and a temporary ban on the article in question, a demand which was eventually rejected by the Higher Court.

## Slovenia



**29** Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts in 2021

Media freedom in Slovenia continued to decline in 2021 under pressure from the government of Prime Minister Janez Janša. The country saw the seventh highest number of alerts on the MapMF platform with 29 alerts and 41 attacked persons or entities related to media, leading the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) to launch an online fact-finding mission in May to assess the situation. Increasing pressure on independent journalism during this time centred on the financial suffocation of the Slovenian Press Agency (STA) and increasing political interference at the public broadcaster. Concerningly, many of these violations were recorded while Slovenia held the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU.

At the beginning of the year, UKOM, the Government Communications Directorate, [suspended](#) the financing of the STA for the second time in three months, in what media rights groups called an attempt to destabilise the agency through financial blackmail. The PM and leading government officials then called for the STA's director general to step down and "be held accountable". Pressure on the STA's leadership increased in May when the PM smeared the director by [accusing](#) him of involvement in the "murder" of a former STA editor-in-chief more than a decade ago. Legally-mandated state funding was withheld for 312 days, causing a 10-month crisis, during which the STA narrowly avoided bankruptcy. This

crisis left the agency, the lifeblood of the Slovenian media ecosystem, drained psychologically as well as financially. Some of its most experienced journalists quit to find jobs elsewhere.

In 2021, the Slovenian public broadcaster, RTVS, also came under sustained pressure from the government, in what media associations and journalists' groups described as part of a wider effort to solidify greater control over the broadcaster and limit critical reporting. Politicised appointments to the broadcaster's oversight bodies continued, in moves to stack decision-making bodies and RTV management with government-aligned figures. In November, [modifications](#) were implemented to RTV news programming which the overwhelming majority of staff said would reduce the broadcaster's ability to inform the public and scrutinise power. In October, the editor-in-chief of the TV Slovenia news programme, Manica Janežič Ambrožič, stepped down in protest. She was followed by three other TV Slovenia editors: Dejan Ladika, Meta Dragolič, and Mitja Prek.

According to MapMF data, individual journalists were the target of 73% of documented cases. The most frequent context was online/digital (13 alerts, 44.8%), with discreditation and denigration of media outlets by public figures a key factor. In February, the PM 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. In April, the PM drew further criticism for accusing daily news show 24ur

and its editor-in-chief of “persistently lying” about the COVID-19 pandemic and contributing significantly to the death toll in the country through its reporting. The same month, the PM accused German journalist [Nikolaus Neumaier](#) from ARD of “censorship in the style” of the Nazi propaganda outlet Der Stürmer. Coordinated smears against journalists by far-right media outlets linked to the ruling party continued. In March, independent investigative outlet Pod črto, was smeared as an “online gestapo” by far-right website Nova 24. In April, far-right online magazine Časnik.si published an article about RTV Slovenia journalist [Erika Žnidaršič](#) which attacked her journalistic credibility and suggested that someone might “maliciously stab you in the ribs”, drawing widespread condemnation.

Physical attacks on journalists remain rare in Slovenia. In January, however, a photographer working for the Megafon.si was [physically threatened and pressured to delete photos they had taken](#). The perpetrators were later arrested. In April, [Bojan Požar](#), a journalist from news and opinion website Požareport, was threatened with violence online. In July, freelance Slovenian journalist [Erik Valenčič](#) also received death threats and insults over the phone. Female journalists in particular continue to receive the brunt of harassment. In September, [Eugenija Carl](#), a journalist at the public broadcaster RTV Slovenia, received a third letter with a threatening handwritten note and an irritating white powder. The MapMF recorded only one case in which a journalist required medical treatment for their injury.

Journalists also faced threats covering violent protests against COVID-19 measures. In September, one of Slovenia’s best-known photojournalists, [Tone Stojko](#), was injured after being tear gassed in the face by a police officer. The same month, a camera operator with POP TV was [punched](#) in the head by an anti-vaccine pass protester. In October, protesters tried to forcefully enter the editorial office of N1 in Ljubljana and ended up [smashing](#) the glass window on one of the office’s front doors. In a serious incident, in September 2021 the headquarters of the RTV Slovenia was [stormed](#) by a group of coronavirus deniers and anti-vaccination protesters, who managed to enter the newsroom, disrupt work, and harass staff.

Legal threats also remain relatively rare in Slovenia. However, in May the Slovenian Government Office for Development and Cohesion Policy initiated [criminal proceedings](#) against the political magazine Mladina after it published a leaked government plan for its post-COVID-19 recovery. In September, Slovenian MP Zmago Jelinčič Plemeniti filed a lawsuit against the editor-in-chief of TV Slovenia, [Manica J. Ambrožič](#). In November, three journalists running the investigative news platform Necenzurirano were [reported](#) to the National Investigation Office (NPU) and the Financial Administration of the Republic of Slovenia (FURS) by tax adviser Rok Snežič, who previously launched 39 different lawsuits against the trio.

## Poland



**24** Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts in 2021

2021 was a pivotal year for media freedom, as the government continued its multi-pronged efforts to weaken critical and independent media. The MapMF recorded 24 violations of media freedom, including 42 attacked persons or entities related to the media. The major flashpoint was the effort by the Law and Justice (PiS) party to pass a controversial media ownership law that would have forced the sale of U.S. owned TVN, the country’s largest broadcaster and a long critic of the ruling party. The bill was eventually vetoed by President Duda following international condemnation and high-level U.S. pressure, puncturing PiS’ legislative plans. However, new SLAPP lawsuits and serious criminal sanctions and a media blackout caused by a government-imposed state of emergency at the Belarusian border posed serious challenges.

Systematic legal harassment of independent media in Poland continued in 2021, as PiS officials and their allies continued efforts to bury critical outlets under an avalanche of costly and time-consuming court battles. Many of these lawsuits were registered by the MapMF as SLAPPS. In March, the Prosecutor-General of Poland, who is also the Minister of Justice, Zbigniew Ziobro, filed a [lawsuit](#) against Adam Michnik, the editor-in-chief of Gazeta Wyborcza, over an investigative report about his salary written by two of the newspaper’s journalists. The same month, the R4S public relations agency,

co-founded by a former PiS spokesperson, [filed](#) a criminal complaint about OKO .press, Gazeta Wyborcza, and Reporters’ Foundation’s journalists with the prosecutor’s office. Also in March, the editor-in-chief of Gazeta Wyborcza, Wyborcza.pl and Agora S.A. and two journalists were [sued](#) by Daniel Obajtek, the chief executive of PKN Orlen, one of the biggest state-owned oil companies.

Journalists faced other forms of legal pressure. In October, police officers [searched](#) the house of Gazeta Wyborcza reporter Piotr Bakselerowicz without a warrant and confiscated his work laptop and phone. In October 2021, the District Prosecutor’s Office in Gdańsk questioned journalist [Katarzyna Włodkowska](#) in connection with her reporting about the investigation into the fatal stabbing of the Gdańsk mayor Paweł Adamowicz in January 2019. She was previously ordered to reveal her source for the article but refused, leaving her facing a possible criminal conviction for protecting her source. In November 2021, Ewa Siedlecka, a journalist at weekly news magazine Polityka, was [convicted](#) of criminal defamation by the District Court for Warsaw-Śródmieście in the Polish capital over her reporting on two judges.

The centrepiece of PiS’s attack on critical media in 2021 was the so-called [Lex TVN](#). On 7 July, PiS MPs submitted a draft bill to parliament which would bar companies which are majority-owned by entities from outside the European Economic Area (EEA) from owning more than a 49% stake in Polish broadcasters. Critics had warned that the bill, later [ad-](#)



[opted](#) by Poland's parliament on December 17, was aimed solely at forcing the sale of U.S.-owned news channel TVN24, which broadcast the country's most-watched news programme, Fakty, and have long held a critical editorial stance towards PiS. International media freedom groups warned the law posed a serious threat to media pluralism. On 27 December, the President announced he would veto the bill, following strong pressure from the U.S. and EU. The draft law was the latest example of a longer-term push towards the "repolonization" of the media by PiS.

The manipulation of regulatory bodies against the media by PiS loyalists remained a concern. At the beginning of the year, the Office of Competition and Consumer Protection (UOKiK), Poland's competition regulator, [blocked](#) the merger of radio broadcaster Eurozet by media house Agora SA, ruling the acquisition would create a "harmful duopoly" in the Polish radio market. Agora denounced the decision as a selective and politically motivated move by the regulator, which is under the effective control of PiS, to stymie its business interests. Other efforts to tighten the screws on independent media included a proposed new advertising tax that was eventually dropped after sustained protests. State resources, meanwhile, continued to be weaponised to starve certain media of public advertising revenue and dampen critical reporting at others. After the takeover in March 2021 of regional publisher Polska Press by state-controlled oil giant PKN Orlen, a total of eight editors-in-chief were [dismissed or pushed out](#), with more follow-

ing later and other editors and journalists at Polska Press titles resigning.

Towards the end of the year, multiple MapMF alerts were documented related to the state of emergency imposed at the Polish border with [Belarus](#). The measure limited the ability of journalists and aid workers to enter the restricted area and prohibited the taking of photographs or video footage of the border. Those convicted of violating the state of emergency faced up to 30 days in prison or a fine of up to 5,000 Polish zloty. Multiple journalists, both national and foreign, who were trying to cover the humanitarian crisis faced arbitrary detentions and intimidation by law enforcement and the military near the restricted zone. In September 2021, police filed two [criminal charges](#) against Onet journalist Bartłomiej Bublewicz and his camera operator for allegedly reporting from inside the restricted zone. On 28 September, three journalists from French-German ARTE TV and Agence France-Presse (AFP) were arrested by police near the border, held in a cell overnight and then found guilty of violating the regulations. On 16 November, three photojournalists reporting from near the border were [detained](#) and handcuffed by individuals wearing the uniforms of the Polish Army.

## Greece



**22** Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts in 2021

Media freedom in Greece was thrust into the international spotlight in April 2021

when well-known Greek crime reporter [Giorgos Karavivaz](#) was gunned down outside his house in Athens. He had returned home from a shift on a daytime show on Star TV when he was ambushed by two men on a moped and shot at least six times with a silenced weapon, killing him instantly. The assassination, the first of a journalist in Greece since 2010, shocked the country's journalistic community and was met with pledges by the Prime Minister to bring those responsible to justice. The killing also led to greater scrutiny of the suffocating climate for independent journalism in a fragmented landscape marked by a politically polarised press.

Even before the assassination, 2021 began with a worrying start for Greece's journalistic community. In January, a [new plan for policing protests](#) was launched by the Ministry of Civil Protection, raising concerns it could seriously limit the ability of journalists and photojournalists to properly cover events in the future. Included in the report were plans to confine journalists to a demarcated area that would be approved beforehand by police. These sections of the plans drew intense opposition and were later scrapped.

Even then, however, challenges for journalistic reporting on protests were clear. According to MapMF data, 23% of all alerts were recorded at demonstrations. In February, for example, Documento photojournalist [Mario-Rafael Biko](#) was detained while covering a protest in Athens. Later that month, a group of police officers in riot gear and armed with plastic shields assaulted the photojournalist [Yannis Liakos](#) in front of the Greek Parliament.

In November, Greek photojournalist [Orestis Panagiotou](#) was hospitalised with a broken toe after being hit by a water cannon used by riot police to try and disperse a protest by firefighters. Overall, police and law enforcement were responsible for 41% of MapMF alerts.

Legal pressures against media outlets remained a concern. In March, an arrest warrant was issued against the publisher of Documento, [Kostas Vaxevanis](#), by members of the Greek police for allegedly violating data privacy rights. The warrant was issued following a criminal lawsuit filed by 22 police officers from the Attica General Police Directorate (GADA). The arrest warrant against Vaxevanis was valid for 24 hours and was never acted upon. Other MapMF alerts involved serious SLAPPs. In October, independent media outlet Alterthess and its journalist Stavroula Poulimeni were targeted by a [SLAPP](#) by an executive at a Greek gold mining company about whose criminal conviction the media had reported. The lawsuit demanded €100,000 in damages and threatened the Poulimeni with criminal sanctions.

Concerns over increased criminal prosecution of journalists increased in November, when the government passed controversial [amendments](#) to the criminal code which introduced fines and jail sentences for journalists found guilty of publishing "false news" in the press or via the internet that was "capable of causing concern or fear to the public or undermining public confidence in the national economy, the country's defense capacity or public health". Under the draft law, the publisher

of a media outlet responsible would also face prison and financial penalties. Journalists' unions in Greece said the bill would lead to journalists self-censoring or being jailed for reporting on sensitive issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The safety of journalists more broadly was also an area of concern. Nearly one in four cases (23%) of alerts on MapMF involved types of physical attacks on journalists. After the murder of Karaivaz, [Vaxevanis](#) published an article stating that he had been informed that a contract had been tendered for his assassination within the criminal underworld. After the alleged threat was reported, Vaxevanis was placed under increased protection. In February, the offices of Greek TV station [Action 24](#) were firebombed and attacked with stones. In June, two gas canisters exploded in front of journalist [Giannis Prenteris'](#) house in Athens at 4am damaging two vehicles. Police launched an investigation to assess whether the explosion was part of a plot to kill or intimidate the journalist. In August, reporter [Eleftheria Spyraiki](#) and a cameraman from OPEN TV station were physically attacked and insulted by an angry group of citizens who damaged their car and stole personal belongings.

Journalists reporting on the contentious issue of illegal refugee "pushbacks" in the Aegean continued to face pressure. In May a reporting team from the Dutch public broadcaster VPRO was [arbitrarily detained](#) by police while trying to document an alleged "pushback". The same happened in November, when German freelance journalist and photographer Tim Lüddemann and his team were [detained](#)

on the Greek island of Lesbos. In November, Dutch journalist [Ingeborg Beugel](#) left the country after being subjected to online harassment and attempts to discredit her work after she was involved in a heated exchange with the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis over allegations of pushbacks. The most serious case of pressure on journalists reporting on migration occurred in November, when leaked documents were published in the Greek newspaper Efimerida ton Syntakton (EFSYN) which revealed that the government's National Intelligence Service (NIS) had been secretly monitoring [Stavros Malichudis](#), a reporter working with the non-profit investigative journalism platform Solomon. The case renewed concerns over source confidentiality and the illegal surveillance of journalists.

## The Netherlands



**20** Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts in 2021

Despite a strong political commitment to media freedom at the highest level, the Netherlands face a number of challenges with regard to the safety of journalists. 2021 was marked by the shooting of investigative journalist [Peter R de Vries](#) on 6 July in the street in Amsterdam. His death, nine days after being shot, has shaken the country. While the case is still under investigation in order to find out the exact circumstances and motives behind the attack, and the alleged relation to his advisory role in the Marengo trial, the issue of the safety of journalists in the Netherlands was widely discussed again. A few days

later, the RTL office, which de Vries had last visited on the day of the shooting, was forced to cancel its programmes after "[serious threats](#)" on its editorial office. In August, Groningen blog Sikkom [editor-in-chief Willem Groeneveld's](#) house was targeted by molotov cocktails. He managed to extinguish the fire in the house in time.

Physical assaults (12), including four resulting in injury, were documented, notably as part of the protests and riots which were triggered in reaction to 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 guards also being targeted. In Urk, a corrosive substance – probably pepper spray – was [sprayed](#) on a security guard's face who required medical treatment on the scene. Another assault endangering the lives of a photographer and his girlfriend illustrated the deplorable and violent conditions in which journalists can find themselves doing their job. They were shooting photos of a car fire when several people started hitting the [photographer's car](#) in which they were seated, before one of them rammed the car with a tractor and flipped it over onto its roof in the ditch.

The lack of respect for journalists and media workers from citizens is a worrying phenomenon in the Netherlands, with 14 out of the 20 media violations perpetrated by private individuals. Data shows that they follow a narrative whereby the news media are biased, "lying", and spreading "fake news".

October 2021 was also marked by three cases of arbitrary detentions of journalists who were covering climate group [Extinction Rebellion's](#) actions in The Hague. Despite their journalists' press cards, they were taken to the police station and could not continue their work. They were freed shortly after proving their journalistic work..

The sharp increase in the number of attacks against journalists and media workers in the Netherlands has prompted the MFRR and its partners to plan a fact-finding mission in 2022.

## Spain



**18** Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts in 2021

Spain follows a trend monitored in several other European countries regarding the safety of journalists during demonstrations, which is becoming an increasingly risky place for media professionals on assignment. With six alerts, they are the main context for physical assaults, threat to professional equipment, and insults.

Physical assaults included a protester [punching](#) a journalist in the face, journalists [hit with batons](#) by riot police, and [shot](#)

at point blank range with non-lethal detonating ammunition. During a protest, journalists' equipment was damaged, with [black paint](#) sprayed on one of the camera lenses to prevent them from continuing to record. In February, the newsroom and office building of El Periodico de Catalunya was [damaged](#) by protesters who smashed the windows and painted the doors, while shouting anti-media slogans. Finally, [Sonia Lopez](#), [Marta Madonado](#), and a reporting crew for La Sexta TV were insulted and harassed while covering anti-mask and anti-vaccine gatherings.

In addition, five attacks to property were recorded. The most serious case targeted the Spanish public broadcaster RTVE in Catalonia, which was heavily affected on the day of the region's parliamentary election. An unknown arsonist damaged [two repeaters](#), the small electronic devices that receive and transmit signals, forcing them to temporarily interrupt their election coverage for about two hours.

Politics is – together with COVID-19 – a sensitive topic which easily triggers insults and hatred. In March, journalists who were reporting live from a political event organised by the [far-right party Vox](#) were insulted and harassed by supporters. One woman journalist was called a “whore” and a “slut”. On its official Twitter account, Vox also suggested that people could express their anger at a satirical magazine's editor after it published several cartoons mocking the party's leadership. The city and street location of the magazine's office were shared. Another example relates that a journalist specialising in far-right movements received [death threats](#)

on Twitter following his participation on a TV programme, where he spoke about the activities of the “Bastion Frontal” youth group. In total, four attacks were recorded online in 2021, including [DDos cyber attacks](#) against several independent media.

Legal threats against journalists and editors were documented in four alerts. Quite disturbing is the fact that several media professionals face possible criminal prosecution over altercations with police officers during demonstrations that they were covering. In November, [four journalists were notified](#) of false testimony in a court case involving an alleged attack by a riot police officer during a protest in Madrid. During the trial, the police officer, who denied the assault, was acquitted while the four journalists, including three witnesses, will end up in court. The other example is El Pais photojournalist, [Albert García](#), who was charged with resisting authority after protests in Barcelona. He was first arrested for an alleged attack against a police officer, before the High Court dismissed the crime and changed the charge. Other legal threats include pressure on journalistic sources and abusive lawsuits. [El Diario's editor](#) was ordered by a judge to reveal who leaked a heritage report to a journalist in an investigation about a former luxury residence owned by the family of General Franco. A few months before, seven journalists were targeted by [civil and criminal lawsuits](#) by the grandchildren of General Franco over an investigative report broadcasted on TV in 2018 about the origin of the Spanish dictator's secret wealth and inheritance. They alleged the TV programme set out to tarnish the family's

honour and image. They have claimed €50,000 in compensation and demanded that the film be destroyed and never broadcast again.

## Albania



**14** Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts in 2021

Media freedom in Albania suffered in 2021 due to concerns over the further solidification of government control over the flow of information. 14 alerts were recorded with 24 individuals or media entities affected. The independence of the system for media regulation also came under threat, while the establishment of a new government agency which would centralise control over public relations and government information raised further worries about media's access to information.

The MapMF documented a few cases of heavy-handed police action in 2021. In July, journalist [Ergys Gjencaj](#) from television channel News 24 was tackled to the ground and detained for an hour after he tried to film an anti-drug operation by police near the Military Academy in Tirana. The police also roughly pushed Gjencaj's colleague Klodiana Lala and obstructed both from filming. In a serious case in November, reporter Anila Hoxha from Top Channel and her colleague Endrit Aga of A2CNN TV had their lives endangered by a police officer as they tried to report from a mountain on the death of a businessman. As they were reporting from the scene, one of the media workers was [pushed](#) by the policeman and almost fell

down a steep precipice. Hoxha suffered injuries and scratches.

Journalists also faced obstruction in carrying out their professional duties from other sources. In April, Ora News journalist Isa Myzyraj was [physically restrained](#) by a security guard of the mayor of Tirana as he tried to ask questions to the politician. The same month, Ora TV journalist Ronaldo Sharka and his reporting crew were intimidated and [forcibly ejected](#) from an electoral meeting organised by the Mayor of Tirana by a large group of the politician's supporters. Other journalists faced physical violence from private individuals. In October, [Ledio Guni](#), an operator for Fax News, was physically attacked in Tirana while he was documenting a dispute. In December, [Besarta Demushaj](#), another journalist with Fax News, was physically and verbally attacked by two men while she was reporting in Tirana. Online harassment of journalists remained a concern, with women journalists often facing the brunt of attacks. In August, the co-editor of Exit News, [Alice Taylor](#), received an insulting message online containing a death threat in response to a text she'd posted on her journalistic blog.

Journalists in Albania meanwhile continue to operate in an extremely difficult climate for accessing information from government sources. Concerns over the ability of journalists to hold power to account increased in June when the Albanian Parliament announced a [change of rules](#) which would restrict the freedom of movement of journalists inside the building. Under the change of regulations agreed by the

National Assembly, members of the media were no longer permitted to enter meetings of parliamentary committees and other sessions, with journalists also facing greater barriers in speaking with MPs. The changes – developed without consulting the media – came into force in September, leading to expressions of protest by media organisations. At the same time, reporters working for independent media are regularly discriminated against when seeking information or comment from ministers. Journalists viewed as representing “opposition” outlets are denied accreditation or barred from asking questions at press conferences.

International fears over the independence of the system for media regulation in Albania also worsened in July when the Albanian parliament [voted](#) to elect a new head of the country’s Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA), disregarding calls from the EU to wait until September when opposition parties could participate. The figure appointed was Armela Krasniqi, a close associate of the Prime Minister with longstanding links to the ruling Socialist Party. Before her appointment, she had been working at the state news agency. Previously, she was employed as Director of Communications in the office of Prime Minister Edi Rama. International press freedom groups raised serious concerns over the appointment of a politically partisan figure to lead the influential and nominally independent body.

In September, Prime Minister Edi Rama then [approved](#) a new agency to centralise control over public relations and govern-

ment information. The new Agency for Media and Information, announced during the first meeting of the new parliament, plans to regulate public and media relations for every ministry and other central institution in Albania. Under new rules, ministry spokespersons would be prohibited from talking to the press directly and all information or comment released will have to first be approved by the new director general. Endri Fuga, another key ally of the PM who has overseen Rama’s public relations for the past eight years, was appointed to head the body, raising concerns that the new body would be used to further solidify government control over the flow of information in Albania. The government pushed ahead with its establishment despite concerns from international media freedom organisations.

While legal threats remain less frequent in Albania, there was one major case in 2021. Ahead of the general election in April 2021, the Special Prosecution Against Organised Crime [ordered](#) journalists Andi Bushati and Armand Shkullaku to hand over a database that contained the personal information of more than 910,000 voters in Albania. When they refused, citing concerns regarding source confidentiality, the Special Court of First Instance in Tirana ordered the seizure of all devices of their media outlet, LAPSI.al, as well as their mobile phones, servers, computers, and USB drives.

## Montenegro



**12** Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts in 2021

In 2021, MapMF documented 12 alerts for Montenegro with 16 attacked persons or entities related to the media. Following a trend across Europe, a vast majority of these attacks (11) were perpetrated by private individuals. Male and female professionals were equally affected.

Political as well as nationalist polarisation are blatant in Montenegro through a number of alerts. In the case of a reporting team from the public broadcaster Radio-television (RTV), a right-wing nationalist group [intimidated and insulted](#) the journalists near the coastal town of Budva. For several weeks, the nationalist group had organised numerous protests over changes to the Law on Citizenship, which would grant Montenegrin citizenship to Russian and Serbian citizens living in the country. The attacked journalists had been caught up in one of their blockades. During another political event in the city of Niksic, on the night of local elections, Vijesti journalist Jelena Jovanović was [attacked](#) by an aggressive man who threw a car’s windscreen wiper towards her, hitting her on the head. Next to these attacks taking place in public places, Antena M editor-in-chief Darko Sukovic and columnist Dragan Bursać faced [death threats online](#) by a Facebook user under the profile Marko Aprcović. Bursać, a well-known Bosnian journalist based in Banja Luka, was ‘warned’ not to go to Montenegro, where he also publishes articles, as he

would receive “a bullet in the head and a salute”.

Public spaces, especially during political rallies, continue to be a difficult environment for Montenegrin journalists: nine cases were reported after individual journalists or teams tried to cover stories in the field. In [four cases](#), media workers were attacked during demonstrations. The first incident of the year took place during a ‘patriotic rally’ in March. Journalist Sead Sadiković working for Vijesti Television [suffered injuries](#) after being attacked by a group of people carrying Montenegrin flags. The Trade Union Media in Montenegro (SMCG) [said](#) that the attack was “a direct consequence of the long-heated political and national passions in Montenegro.” Two suspects were immediately arrested, which the MFRR network welcomed given that ending impunity was one of the main challenges raised after the [press freedom mission to Montenegro in 2020](#). It must be ensured that police and prosecutors investigate all threats and bring perpetrators to justice.

Five attacks were related to protests against the enthronement of a Serbian Orthodox Church cleric as the nation’s religious leader, which took place in the city of Cetinje on 5 September. The enthronement of Joanikije II at a monastery in Cetinje stirred divisions within Montenegro over ties with neighbouring Serbia, also between the country’s Prime Minister and President. Though Montenegro left its union with Serbia in 2006, its church remained under the Serbian church. The protests turned very violent, with demonstrators who opposed the enthronement

acting hostilely towards media workers. They reportedly [threw stones at a N1 TV crew](#), another N1 journalist was heavily [obstructed in her work](#), and a Vijesti TV crew was [insulted and hindered](#) from live reporting. In the last case, Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapic visited the media outlet and condemned the incident.

Apart from attacks during these protests, one major case of intimidation related to the enthronement was initiated by Dejan Vukšić, the director of Montenegro's National Security Agency (ANB). Vukšić had filed a [criminal complaint](#), alleging that journalist Nenad Zečević had illegally published secret information about the security sector. The complaint stemmed from a report published on 30 September, entitled "The ANB would like to hide the names of people of security interest who were in the Monastery". It contained the ANB's conclusions about whether there had been armed individuals inside the Cetinje Monastery on 05 September, when violent protests broke out between demonstrators and police. The allegation was denied by the journalist and his newspaper Pobjeda, who called this complaint an attempt to pressure journalists to stop reporting about ANB's operations.

## Hungary



**12** Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts in 2021

In 2021, the Fidesz government of Prime Minister Viktor Orban continued its steady erosion of media pluralism. As part of global revelations, an investigative re-

porting project meanwhile unearthed the surveillance of multiple Hungarian journalists using the Pegasus spyware developed by Israeli spyware firm NSO Group, leading to fresh concerns about the illegal surveillance of journalists and their sources. Hungary was the only country in the EU in which the state intelligence agencies were suspected of targeting their own nation's journalists. The 12 alerts recorded on the MapMF platform, and 47 attacked persons or entities related to media, do not reflect the true scale of the challenges facing media freedom in Hungary, which continued to be among the lowest of the EU member states. Unlike other EU states, however, the state/government was the source of 50% of documented alerts, indicating the continued pressure by the Fidesz party on independent media.

On 18 July 2021, the NGO Forbidden Stories published an investigation into the use of Pegasus spyware to target 180 journalists worldwide, including in Hungary. Forensic analysis indicated that the Hungarian intelligence or security services [deployed](#) the invasive technology against journalists and other media actors. At least five journalists featured in the leaked phone records, including Szabolcs Panyi, a reporter at investigative outlet Direkt36, and his colleague András Szabó. Others selected for potential targeting include Dávid Dercényi, who edits a newspaper put out by the authority of an opposition-run district in Budapest; a [photojournalist](#); and a well-known investigative journalist. Furthermore, the circle of investor Zoltán Varga, who owns several independent media outlets, was potentially surveilled.

The revelations led to condemnation from press freedom groups and the European Union, as well as the launch of investigation by the Hungarian government, which had initially denied it had purchased NSO's technology.

2021 also saw another major critical broadcaster in the crosshairs of Fidesz and its allies. In February, the influential Budapest-based radio station Klubrádió was [forced off the air](#), after its appeal against the Media Council's refusal to renew its licence made in September 2020 was rejected by a court. Klubrádió, which was the country's last major independent radio, was [denied its license renewal](#) on spurious and clearly discriminatory grounds by the media regulator, which is stacked with figures appointed directly by the Fidesz government. The media council's ruling was upheld by the high court in September 2021. Klubradio was forced to broadcast online, greatly undermining its reach and influence. In a rare move, the European Commission launched infringement proceedings against the Hungarian government over the decision. The regulatory pressure against Klubradio was the latest example of the Fidesz model of media capture, which over the last 10 years has systematically eroded media pluralism by engineering the closure or takeover of independent media.

One central element of this model was Fidesz's control over the system of media regulation. In another example of regulatory pressure on critical media, in March 2021 the Media Council of the National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH) initiated [legal proceedings](#)

against the RTL Hungary media group, the only remaining major critical television channel, for broadcasting an advert on TV which was aimed at raising awareness and acceptance of LGBTQ families. It brought the legal case against the independent broadcaster with justification that the advert was not suitable for children. The regulator said that the action was based on complaints it had received from viewers. It then reviewed the advert and decided to initiate formal proceedings against RTL Hungary, saying the advert should only have been aired after 9pm for reasons of "child protection". Illustrating another part of the model, in 2021 state advertising continued to be used to fund pro-government media while independent outlets were almost completely excluded, further distorting competition.

During 2021, independent journalists in Hungary also continued to be subject to pervasive discrimination by the state in terms of access to information. The government continued to use the COVID-19 pandemic to exert further control over information, only responding to pro-government media inquiries and placing a ban on local health sector representatives from talking to the media, channelling all pandemic related questions through a centralised 'operative unit'. At the same time, access to health workers for journalists was curtailed. In March 2021, Hungarian independent media issued a [joint letter](#) accusing the government of putting lives at risk by barring the media from covering the extent of the crisis in hospitals. The 28 media outlets said the reporting restrictions seriously hindered their ability to work and were aimed at shielding the

government from criticism over its handling of the pandemic. Access to speak with doctors and public health officials was coordinated by Hungarian government authorities. Only state media, under the control of the Fidesz party, were permitted into hospitals and COVID-19 wards to report and film.

Restrictions extended to government press conferences. In June, staff from newspapers including Magyar Hang and Direkt36 were [denied entry](#) to a press conference with Prime Minister Orbán, despite having registered on time. Journalists had attempted to attend the event to pose questions but were blocked at the entrance without justification, despite having accreditation. In October, the Hungarian Minister of State for International Communication [held a press conference](#) in front of an almost empty room and did not invite journalists from any independent and critical news outlets. Journalists from what remains of Hungary's independent media, including representatives from 444.hu and Media1, only learnt about the press conference shortly afterwards on social media. However, posts from colleagues working for state agencies such as the Hungarian Telegraph Office (MTI) indicated they were in attendance and had been invited in advance.

Journalists also faced legal pressure. In March 2021, for example, Hungary's Supreme Court [fined](#) Hungarian journalist Árpád W. Tóta for violating the dignity of the Hungarian nation in an op-ed article he wrote in 2018 which ironically referred to the Magyar people as "Hungarian bandits". The journalist, a vocal critic of the

government, wrote the article for news outlet HGV, an independent current affairs weekly. A legal case was brought against him by two individuals using collective personality litigation, two civil law provisions adopted during the Orban governments, which allow citizens who believe their national identity has come under assault to seek legal redress. The judge ruled Tóta had infringed on Hungarian law by violating the dignity of the Hungarian nation and ordered him to pay 1,000 HUF in damages. An appeals court then overturned the judgement and dismissed the plaintiffs' action. A second appeal took the case to the Kúria, where the court ordered the removal of the text and a public apology from HVG and awarded damages.

## Positive Developments

While there were hundreds of alerts across Europe in 2021, there were also positive developments that were welcomed by media freedom actors. In the beginning of the year, the European Commission announced the establishment of an Expert group against SLAPPs with a specific mission to advise the Commission on matters related to fighting SLAPPs or supporting the journalists and media outlets that were targeted by them. ECPMF's legal advisor Flutura Kusari is also a part of this group and the EC is expected to propose legislative and non-legislative measures to counter SLAPPs.

The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, announced the details of a new [Media Freedom Act](#) during her annual State of the Union speech on 15 September. In that same month, the Commission adopted a [Recommendation to Member States to improve the safety of journalists](#), both online and offline. It called for the creation of independent national services to support journalists including, among others, helplines, shelters, and legal advice. In October, the European Parliament voted to adopt the Own Initiative Report (INI) on strengthening democracy and media freedom and pluralism in the EU: the undue use of actions under civil and criminal law to silence journalists, NGOs and civil society.

In addition to the European Union institutions and leaders' actions in the field of media freedom, the Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) also published a Special Report titled "Legal Harassment and abuse of the judicial system against the media" with an aim to bring more attention to the legal risks associated with the journalistic profession and to highlight the increasing abuse of judicial systems against media professionals across Europe.

In a more targeted focus, the European Commission took action in member state specific topics, related to state capture of the media landscape. In April, the EC approved a € 2.5 million grant, under the EU state aid programmes, for the Slovenian Press Agency (STA) to fulfil its public service mission. In June, the EC also announced that it would open procedures against Hungary over a decision by the government-controlled Media Council to reject Klubrádió's application to return to air.

In terms of positive developments at the national level, Jean Chéritel, the CEO of the Chéritel group, a fruit and vegetable wholesaler in the Brittany region of France, dropped his defamation action against freelance investigative journalist [Inès Léraud](#) in January. The legal threat related to Léraud's investigation, published in Basta! on 26 March 2019, which shed light on alleged illegal practises of the company. While the media freedom community welcomed the dropping of Mr Chéritel's defamation action, it must be

noted that the enduring chilling effect of vexatious legal threats and SLAPP actions encourage journalists to self-censor, regardless of the initiation of any actual court proceedings.

In November in Turkey, two developments took place. While the country had initiated a [ban on all audiovisual recordings](#) at demonstrations, through declaration of a circular issued by the General Directorate of Security, the State Council of the Republic of Turkey unanimously overruled that this ban was unlawful. Another positive development concerning Turkey involved global social media company Meta, as the ban on links for arts and culture publication [Tiyatro Dergisi](#) was lifted on Instagram and Facebook, allowing the publishers to share links to their articles again after months of digital censorship.

Finally, in October, independent journalism's significance was also acknowledged by the Norwegian Nobel Committee as they announced their decision to award the Nobel Peace Prize for 2021 to two journalists, Maria Ressa and Dmitry Muratov for their efforts to safeguard freedom of expression, a precondition for democracy and lasting peace.

## Conclusion

The 2021 Monitoring Report has focused on analysing the main attacks suffered by journalists and media workers throughout Europe during a year that has again been shaped by the impact of COVID-19. As shown in the report, threats related to the pandemic remained high, and in many countries journalists were attacked when covering protests against restrictions or vaccination mandates.

Incidents linked to the pandemic took place in many countries, ranging from violence against journalists in demonstrations to reporters barred from hospitals or from interviewing healthcare professionals. In some cases, protesters also entered newsrooms and harassed journalists in their workplace.

However, physical attacks were not the only threat faced by journalists. In fact, online attacks rose in the past year. Reporters from several countries were harassed and intimidated online, many times through social media. In some cases, attacks came from anonymous sources, but prominent political figures also used social media platforms to criticise journalists and even to accuse them of lying to the public for accurately reporting on several social issues.

In 2021, it became clear that the media has become a target for many actors:

from governments trying to obstruct free press to individuals who are unhappy with the current social, health, and economic situation. In a time of crisis and turmoil, it is essential that journalists are safe so they can offer information to the public when it is most needed. This is why protecting media workers from physical, psychological, and legal attacks must be a top priority.

# 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



## Disclaimer

The respective alerts for this Monitoring Report can be viewed directly in the Alert Explorer [here](#).

This report includes all incidents of the year 2021 published until 17 January 2022. If cases are reported and published after this date, they will still appear in the data available under the link of the Alert Explorer above to give an up-to-date view at any time.

One incident and thus alert alert can include multiple types of attacks (e.g. verbal and physical attack performed within the same incident) affecting more than one journalist or media actor and performed by more than one type of actor. Especially legal incidents where journalists or outlets receive multiple related or similar legal threats, are currently recorded as one alert. This means, when showing e.g. how many alerts included a certain type of attack, the sum of all shown numbers can be more than the total number of alerts and more than 100 %.



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