



**MEDIA FREEDOM
RAPID RESPONSE**

MAPPING MEDIA FREEDOM

A FOUR-MONTH SNAPSHOT – II



Monitoring Report

EFJ – IPI – ECPMF | July 2020 – October 2020

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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.

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INTRODUCTION

The second monitoring report for the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR), covering the reporting period between July and October 2020, remains under the cloud of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the direct public health implications continue to affect journalists, media workers and outlets, the impact of the crisis has manifested in a number of unpredicted ways that continue to affect and damage media freedom across EU Member States and Candidate Countries (MFRR region). It has also further entrenched a number of worrying trends that could outlast the pandemic itself. With the pandemic as a background, and a context for increased state intervention, journalists and media workers across the region have faced near-unprecedented roadblocks and restrictions on their ability to work fully and free from unnecessary administrative hurdles, threats of harassment, legal action, detention or violence.

Beyond the pandemic, media freedom in Europe continues to be placed on a precarious footing. Throughout the reporting period, 114 alerts were verified and published on Mapping Media Freedom. However, there is no one single mechanism or motivation for attacks on journalists and media workers, and no singular source. The nature, frequency and type of media freedom violations reconfigure to fit every political or national context, ideology and persuasion and utilises a range of techniques to silence journalists, stifle their work and encourage them to step away from important

reporting. This complex interplay of actors, motivations and legal jurisdictions paints a fragmented and worrying picture of the overall region that requires concerted attention, pressure and action from media actors, national governments and European institutions. This report expands on and dissects the reports uploaded and verified on the Mapping Media Freedom (MMF) platform, as well as supplementary monitoring processes undertaken by the MFRR and other relevant partners.

While COVID-19 dominates the media landscape, a number of trends are contained in this report that exert a discernible influence on the ability of journalists and media workers to continue their work. When Daphne Caruana Galizia was assassinated in 2017, she was facing 47 active civil and criminal libel suits filed in various jurisdictions, including Malta and the United States. Three years after her assassination, 25 remain active. The use of legal threats, vexatious legal actions and Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), to target journalists and encourage them to avoid certain topics of public interest is a Europe-wide phenomenon that skews the media landscape in favour of powerful and wealthy individuals.

While legal threats are complex and time-intensive processes, requiring access to legal expertise and representation, threats to journalists are not always presented in such formalised processes. Across the entire

MFRR region, a growing trend of anti-media rhetoric has increased, both online and off, resulting in targeted harassment, threats and smear campaigns directed at journalists and media workers. Reinforced by national or regional issues such as territorial or geopolitical conflicts, anti-refugee, migrant or xenophobic sentiment and increased polarisation that demonises media workers as agents of the state, peddlers of disinformation or perceived enemies, harassment is an increasingly common type of threat facing journalists and media workers. This includes a worrying trend of gendered harassment and abuse including threats of sexual violence directed at women. The pervasiveness of this type of threat, the low number of reports made to police, inadequate legal protections and the potential absence of physical violence that follows, has often resulted in this sort of threat being accepted by journalists as ‘something that comes with the territory’.

This monitoring report follows on from the previous report published in July that covered the period between March and June 2020. This report uses the same approach and format to analyse the trends, themes and topics that shaped media freedom in the MFRR region as a whole, alongside specific contexts for a range of countries that require specific attention. For more information about the MFRR’s monitoring of media freedom violations, please read the first monitoring report published in July 2020.

This report compiled by MFRR partners, EFJ and IPI, with support from the ECPMF, ana-

lyses and presents a micro- and macro-level diagnosis of the health of the European media landscape over a four-month period from July until the end of October 2020, exploring country-specific threats to media freedom, as well as a region-wide comparative analysis of key trends and themes that require robust and concerted action to stem.

This report is structured in five sections. First we will present a visual representation of different datasets from Mapping Media Freedom to present an overall picture of the platform and the broad health of the media environment in EU Member States and Candidate Countries. Following this is a country-by-country analysis divided between IPI and EFJ, which includes specific analysis of a selection of countries within the MFRR region. Following this is a Cross Regional Thematic Comparative Analysis, which interrogates trends that affect media and press freedom across the entire MFRR region, including the use of legal threats and Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) to target journalists, media workers and outlets, alongside an analysis of harassment, threats and smear campaigns directed at journalists and media workers, both online and off, as a result of their work. Due to the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside government responses to it, an additional chapter follows, building on IPI’s analysis in the previous monitoring report. This is then followed by a conclusion that brings all analysis together.

MAPPING MEDIA FREEDOM

A Four-Month Snapshot

81



PHYSICAL &
PSYCHOLOGICAL
THREAT

33

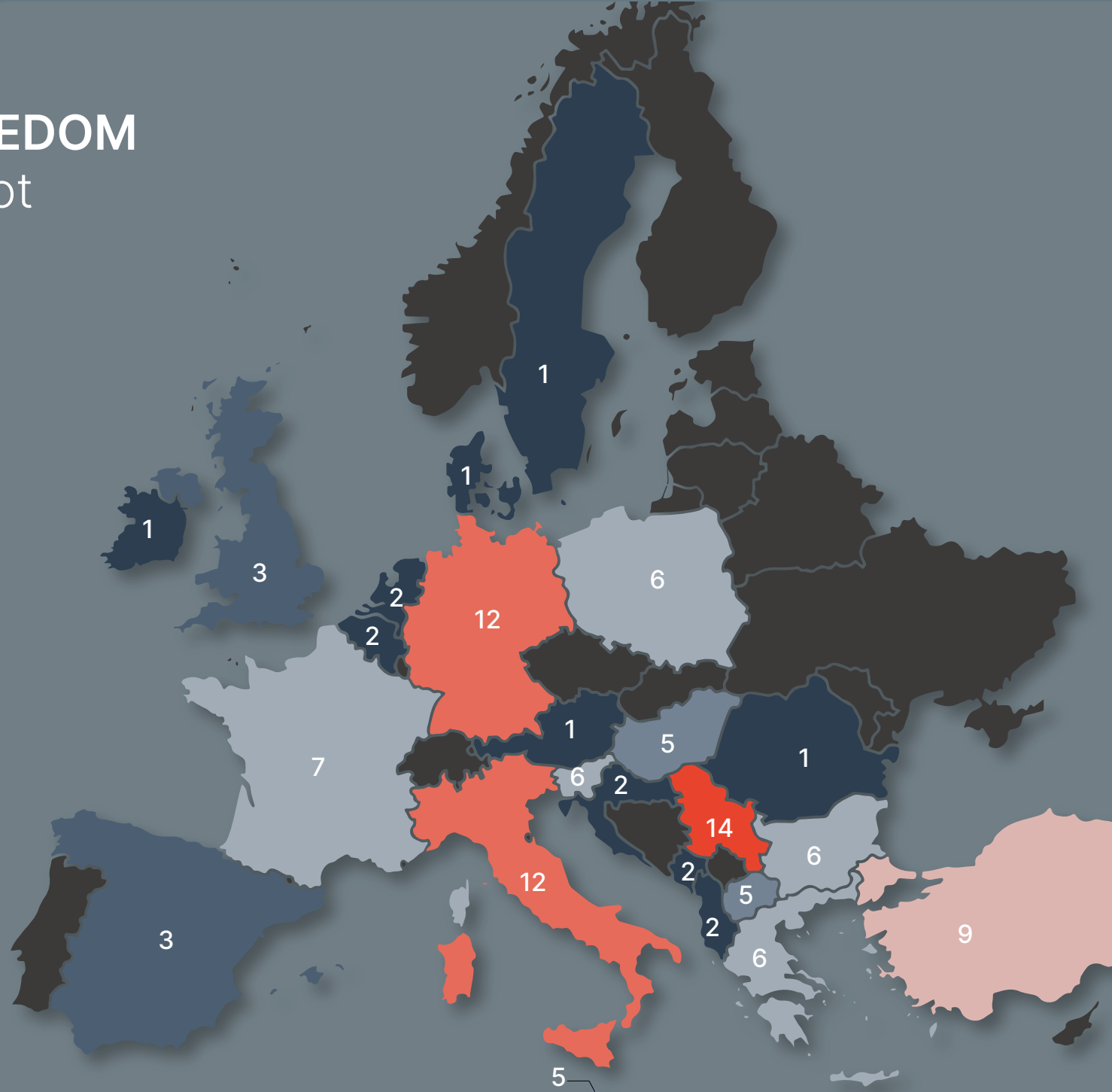


LEGAL
THREAT

21



CENSORSHIP



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



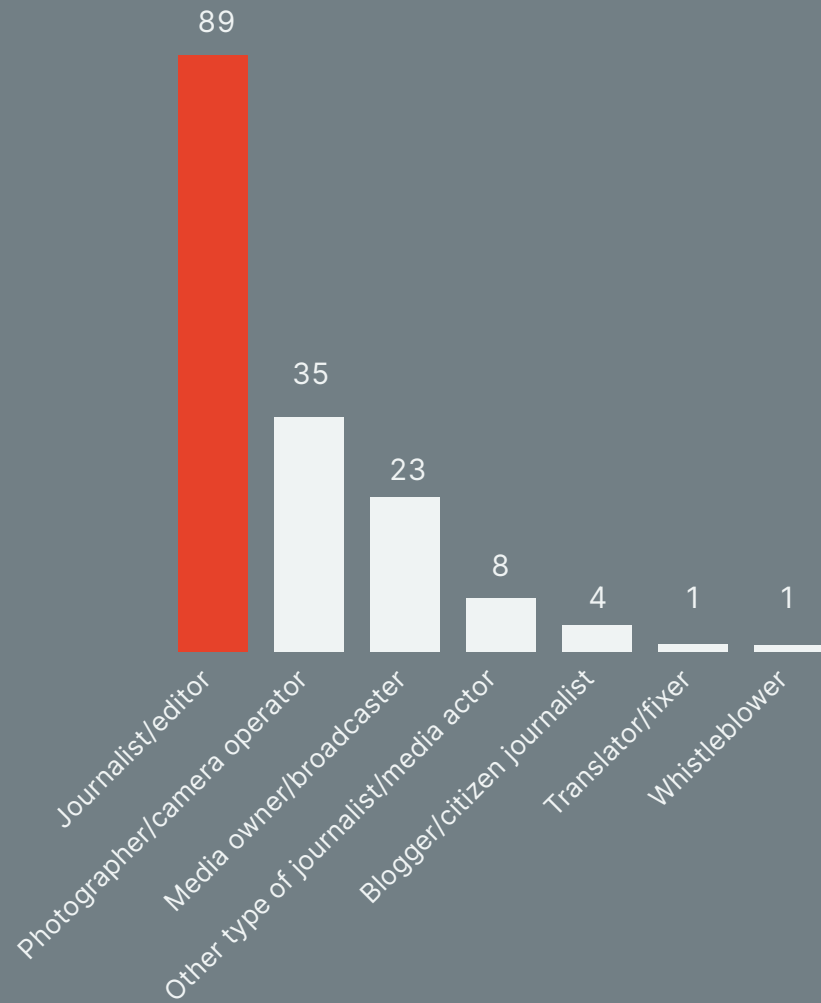
TYPE OF INCIDENT

July - October 2020

CONTEXT OF INCIDENT

July - October 2020





TYPE OF MEDIA ACTOR

July - October 2020

SOURCE OF INCIDENT

July - October 2020



POLICE /
STATE SECURITY

23



LEGISLATION

20



JUDICIARY

8



POLITICAL
PARTY

4



CORPORATION /
COMPANY

3



PUBLIC
AUTHORITIES

4



PRIVATE
INDIVIDUAL(S)

53



PRIVATE
SECURITY

1



CRIMINAL
ORGANISATION

5



ANOTHER
MEDIA

1



UNKNOWN
SOURCE

15



EMPLOYER/
PUBLISHER/
COLLEAGUE(S)

4

COUNTRY-BY-COUNTRY REPORTS (EFJ)

Germany

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: **12**

In the reporting period, Germany – together with Italy – led the EU Member States in terms of number of media freedom violations published on MMF. While this can be partly explained by the strength of the MFRR's networks in this country, it clearly confirms a trend in the deterioration of press and media freedom, especially when it comes to covering demonstrations. It shows the increasing risks facing journalists during demonstrations as they become victims and targets due to their work. The 12 alerts from July to October relate to 31 attacked persons or entities. The most common type of incident refers to threats and intimidation (10) and physical assaults (6), three of which resulted in injuries.

Since the beginning of 2020, numerous protests have taken place in Germany on various political ideologies and topics as already highlighted in the previous report. Recently, demonstrations against the government's COVID-19 responses have been attended by a wide range of actors, but also include conspiracy theorists, as well as far-right and extremist groups who have been particularly hostile towards the press. This reveals a low regard for the profession and a lack of trust in traditional journalism and individual journalists which is exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In a majority of the reported cases,

private individuals were behind the [insults, threats](#) and even [physical violence](#) that occurred during anti-COVID-19 response demonstrations.

German journalists' unions have repeatedly deplored the lack of police support for journalists during demonstrations. Some alerts even documented obstruction of work by police or security personnel. During the eviction of an [occupied house in Berlin](#) in October, police impeded the work of journalists on several occasions by assaulting them or not letting them approach the scene. Earlier, on 17 July, a [freelance journalist](#) was covering a demonstration in Weiden and in addition to being pushed by a demonstrator, she was also accused of "provocation" by a police officer who then asked to see her video equipment. As a result of this episode and her coverage, she received a threat of legal action in connection with the German privacy law (Datenschutzgrundverordnung), as well as abuse on social media platforms.

Protests were a prominent venue of hostility and threats, but [stirring up hatred](#) and attempts to [discredit the press](#) also occurred in other contexts. In late October, a [human-sized doll](#) was hung from a bridge over the Weser in Minden by un-

known individuals. The doll had a sign saying "Covid-Presse" around its neck and was wearing a mask over its eyes reading "blind". This came at a time where local media outlets, including Mindener Tageblatt had been targeted by anti-media abuse. Moreover, two journalists from TV channel WDR were [accused on Twitter](#) of bringing their own neo-Nazi flags (Reichflagge) to a demonstration in Co-

logne to allegedly get better footage. Threats by far-right extremists were reported in at least four cases, for instance in July, a series of letters signed by someone identifying themselves as NSU 2.0, (in reference to the National Socialist Underground), were sent to Maybrit Illner, journalist and TV host at German's public service TV broadcaster, ZDF, which contained [death threats](#) and [insults](#).

Serbia

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: **14**

The situation of press and media freedom in Serbia remains of great concern to MFRR partners. Between July and the end of October 2020, 14 alerts with 7 of them documenting violations against journalists and media workers during protests were uploaded to Mapping Media Freedom. This refers to a large public movement that started on 7 July 2020 in several cities in Serbia in opposition to the Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. After relaxing measures and allegedly lying about the number of infected and deceased for the purpose of holding the parliamentary elections, the government announced a weekend curfew following a rise in COVID-19 cases. As a result, thousands of people took to the streets to protest against the measures for five consecutive days, starting peacefully before turning violent with clashes between the police and demonstrators.

As we have seen across Europe, journalists became victims and targets of violence during demonstrations. In the case of Serbia, MFRR recorded physical or verbal attacks against at least 28 professionals in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Nis, in the first half of July. A number of alerts reported physical assaults resulting in injuries, and damage to professional equipment. At least seven Beta News Agency reporters were targeted by the crowd with three of them, [Milos Miskov](#), [Svetlana Dojcinovic](#) and [Zikica Stevanovic](#) requiring hospitalisation for a fractured skull, a minor hand injury, as well as wounds in the head and eyes. The day before, Nova.rs journalist [Vojislav Milovancevic](#) was admitted to the emergency department after he was beaten up by a group of individuals. An incident involving public broadcaster [RTS crew in Nis](#) is another disturbing example indicative of the difficulty for journalists to work freely and

safely in public places. As the crew was preparing to join a live news programme, a group of demonstrators surrounded the two journalists, insulted them, sprayed water at their camera, ripped out the microphone and camera cables and threw a can at the journalist's head. However, violent acts were equally attributed to police officers. N1 reporter [Jelena Zorić](#) was tear-gassed, Nova.rs portal [Marko Radonjić](#) and [Milica Božinović](#) were beaten with batons when they were reporting live from the protest, despite being clearly identified as 'press'. Cases of serious threats and intimidation were documented in five MMF alerts. They include numerous online [death threats](#), but also attacks such as [breaking into FOLonline editor's house](#) and threatening his family with death, Sandzak Television editor-in-chief being [threatened at gunpoint](#) and N1's editor Branislav Sovljanski having his [car tyre punctured five times](#).

It is uncertain whether all the cases listed above were reported to law enforcement authorities. Even for those reported, there is no evidence that they will be thoroughly investigated despite calls by MFRR and local partners. It is important to note that MFRR local partners are also under great political pressure and scrutiny as documented in one [alert](#) about a financial probe requesting 37 NGOs, media freedom, journalists' organisations and 20 individuals to give access to their bank records in order to verify whether they are connected to money laundering or terrorist financing. A number of organisations targeted by this probe include prominent unions and journalist associations, including the Independent Journalists Association of Serbia (IJAS) and the Journalists Association of Serbia (JAS).

France

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: 7

The debate over the dissemination of images of law enforcement authorities at work reached a new level after French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin proposed, with two texts, to better regulate the exercise of law and order. While there is a legitimate need to review existing practices, the French government was accused of restricting freedom in the name of security.

The [National Policing Plan](#) was published in September 2020. It raised serious concerns among journalists for two main reasons: discrimination in favour of journalists "holding a press card and accredited to authorities" (the distinction between journalists who do and do not hold a press card was also denounced in an alert referring to detention and custody of [10 journalists](#) at Roissy airport). Concerns also related to a new offence

targeting those who remain in a crowd after having been warned by authorities, which will apply indiscriminately to both protesters and journalists covering the protest. Journalists and other media actors saw it as a green light for law enforcement authorities to prevent media professionals from fully reporting on protests. A month later, the bill on '[global security](#)' further confirmed the government's intention to restrict the work of journalists by proposing a bill – under a fast track procedure – which would establish a sanction of up to €45,000 and one year's imprisonment, to anyone who disseminates images of police and gendarmerie officers "with the aim of causing harm to his or her physical or psychological integrity". This would target journalists covering the work of police officers. Due to the well-documented history of French police actions that require press coverage, such as violence and disproportionate responses to protests, this has laid the groundwork for a larger debate on police violence in France and the willingness of the state to tackle it.

Further to this, continued pressure on the satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo showed that freedom of expression is still very fragile in France as new threats arose during the trial of those allegedly responsible for the 2015 massacres, which started in Paris on 2 September. A specific alert concerned a [media worker](#) who has been living under police protection since the terror attack. New threats to her life were established following the republication of

the cartoon depicting the prophet Mohammed to mark the start of the trial. She required temporary relocation to a safe location and enhanced police protection. The same cartoon provoked another knife attack against [two media workers](#) from an audiovisual production, nearby Charlie Hebdo's former newsroom. The attacker intended to target journalists from the weekly, whose office was relocated for security reasons shortly after the 2015 attack. The National Anti-Terrorist Prosecutor's Office opened an investigation into attempted murder in relation to a terrorist enterprise. The two persons were taken to hospital with severe injuries. Charlie Hebdo also faced hostility from outside France. Another caricature was published at the end of October amid a diplomatic conflict between France and Turkey. The cartoon, depicting Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in underwear, has resulted in [legal threats](#) against Charlie Hebdo as the Ankara public prosecutor's office announced an inquiry into the media outlets' directors.

North Macedonia

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: **5**

Online harassment remains a major concern in North Macedonia as four alerts uploaded over the reporting period refer to intimidation and threats made via social media platforms, most notably Twitter and Facebook. Threats took place in the context of the COVID-19 media coverage and the July parliamentary elections. It is important to note that most cases have been reported to the relevant authorities, with inconsistent results as documented in a [MFRR letter to Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev](#).

As we have seen in many countries since the beginning of the pandemic, journalists who covered COVID-19 related topics faced restriction and intimidation by private individuals and law enforcement. In the case of [Biljana Sekulovska](#), police officers prevented her from carrying out her work and threatened legal actions as she tried to film a police patrol performing checks during the COVID-19 curfew in Skopje. The officers ordered her to stop filming despite her presenting her permission to move around during curfew. Two weeks later, the Ministry of Interior announced that an investigation had concluded that the actions of the police officers involved were illegal and that they will face disciplinary procedures. In the case of [Miroslava Byrns](#), the violation took place online, after she published an article about a wedding in Tetovo that gathered about 200 people in July, at a moment where gatherings were forbid-

den due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, she received threats on Facebook and was given 24-hour police protection after the police considered these to be of a serious enough nature to warrant such a response.

The early parliamentary elections took place on 15 July in a relatively peaceful environment. Still MFRR recorded two cases of online harassment against Brussels-based correspondent for MIA news agency Tanja Milevska and human rights NGO CIVIL for reports in relation to the elections. Milevska received [threats of physical and sexual violence](#) via Twitter from various pseudonymous accounts in relation to her coverage of the election campaign. Threatening and insulting messages also targeted activist and journalist [Xhabir Deralla](#) from CIVIL on Facebook, whose office was vandalised the previous month.

Hostile sentiments towards the press by right-wing partisans were also recorded once during a protest organised by the political party VMRO-DPMNE. Journalist Milka Smilevska and camera operator Jorde Angelovic were covering the protest in Skopje for Al Jazeera when they were [assaulted and prevented](#) from carrying out interviews by a protester. The person who hit Smilevska's arm causing her to drop the microphone was eventually taken for questioning by the police.

COUNTRY-BY-COUNTRY REPORTS (IPI)

Poland

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: **6**

Press freedom in Poland continued to suffer during the reporting period as the threat of so-called “repolanisation” and “deconcentration” loomed over the country’s foreign-owned media companies and publications critical of the government faced continued legal harassment amidst a polarised presidential election.

On 3 July, the incumbent and ultimate election winner, Andrzej Duda, publicly [singled out](#) and accused journalist Philipp Fritz, a Warsaw correspondent of WELT, of being part of a “German attack” to influence the outcome of the election. Similar unfounded comments were made against other German-owned media outlets, creating a narrative to justify rewriting the law on foreign media ownership. Formal plans were [announced](#) by the governing Law and Justice (PiS) party on 19 July, with party leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski saying that the government planned to pass the laws before the end of its term in 2023.

PiS criticism of critical media reached boiling point during the campaign, when, on 7 July, unknown persons broke into the headquarters of Maxmedia Publishing House in Warsaw, stole equipment and [vandalised the walls](#) with a swastika symbol. It is believed the perpetrators mistook it for the offices of the major Polish

television networks TVN, which is owned by an American company and whose coverage is critical of the government. After Duda claimed victory, on 23 September it was reported that two journalists with the tabloid Fakt, the most read newspaper in Poland, were [refused accreditation](#) to travel on the presidential plane during a state visit to Italy, in apparent retaliation for Fakt’s critical coverage of Duda during the campaign.

In October, incidents of aggression towards journalists were documented by MFRR partners. On 16 October, a camera operator for TVP3 Gdańsk was [attacked and beaten](#) as he was covering the arrest of a high-profile Polish businessman by anti-corruption police. Further attacks took place amidst nationwide protests in response to the controversial Constitutional Tribunal ruling restricting access to abortion. On 23 October, two journalists for Gazeta Wyborcza, Magda Kozioł and Joanna Urbańska-Jaworska, were [assaulted](#) by a masked man as they filmed a group of 30 black-clad men intimidating protesters during a women’s march in Wrocław. During the four-month period, MFRR partners also documented and monitored a barrage of lawsuits launched against investigative news outlet OKO.press.

Italy

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: 12

In October 2020, MFRR partners recorded a sharp increase in the number of physical attacks and acts of intimidation against journalists and media workers in Italy, where the overarching theme was attacks on media crews reporting live from the scene of protests against the government's COVID-19 lockdown measures. According to MFRR monitoring, most of these nine attacks were carried out by members of far-right, conspiracy theory and anti-mask groups. Four physical attacks resulted in injury and one included a journalist being hospitalised with a head trauma.

On 10 October, Saverio Tommasi, a journalist at Fanpage.it, was insulted and received [death threats](#) from anti-face mask protesters at a demonstration in Rome. On 19 October, journalist Mimmo Rubio was [threatened](#) by individuals protesting against the regional lockdown. On 23 October, Paolo Fratter, a reporter for Sky TG 24, and two camera operators, were [attacked](#) with glass bottles and stones thrown at them as they reported live from anti-lockdown protests in Naples. On 28 October, a journalist and camera operator from Rai 2 programme TG2 were intimidated and [robbed](#) of their equipment as they were covering protests in Palermo. Days later, on 30 October, Valerio Lo Muzio, a video journalist working for la Repubblica, was [threatened](#), pushed and

chased as he covered similar events in Bologna. The same day, several media workers covering anti-curfew protests in Florence were subjected to insults and [intimidation](#).

In separate incidents linked to the far-right, on 14 October, journalist Paolo Berizzi was again targeted in a [graffiti smear](#) campaign by a suspected neo-fascist group. In August, the president of the Italian Federation of Journalists (FNSI), Giuseppe Giulietti, was also targeted by [online harassment](#) and intimidation from far-right groups.

Others faced physical attacks for their reporting on COVID-19. In the most serious incident, on 31 October, photojournalist Tommaso Germogli was diagnosed with a [head trauma](#) after being attacked by a street vendor while documenting adherence to COVID-19 regulations in Florence. On 23 July, journalist Roberta Di Matteo and camera operator Ottavio Chiaradia from Rai were [attacked](#) as they were preparing a report on the quarantining of migrants.

During this period, the continued threat to media from organised crime groups operating in Italy remained clear. On 8 September, Michele Santagata, a journalist and manager at online outlet Iacchitè, was [ambushed](#) and assaulted in broad

daylight in Cosenza. It followed a series of articles reporting on alleged judicial corruption involving a local mayor, judge, and an alleged boss in the 'Ndrangheta. On 12 October, two cars belonging to journalist couple Claudio Brambilla and Luisa Biella were destroyed in a [suspected arson attack](#). In July, Kelly Duda, an American in-

vestigative journalist and filmmaker was criminally [charged](#) with “offending the honor or prestige of a magistrate,” in what press freedom groups said was an attempt to silence his reporting of an Italian pharmaceutical group.

Slovenia

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: 6

In Slovenia, media freedom continued to deteriorate between July and October as the new administration of Prime Minister Janez Janša and his Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) pushed ahead with its politically-motivated attempts to defund the country's public broadcaster, while major SLAPP cases were launched against an investigative news outlet critical of the government. The harassment of journalists by the PM, other leading politicians and their supporters on social media, identified in the previous reporting period, continues.

On 2 August, Uroš Urbanija, the Acting Director of the Government Communication Office (UKOM) in Slovenia tweeted to urge citizens to report and [denounce](#) any media or journalists in Slovenia who “obviously and shamelessly use manipulations” in their work to purposefully mislead people. Later that month, on 27 September, Janša [publicly mocked](#) a journalist on Twitter by suggesting he had recently been released from a mental health hos-

pital. This targeting and demonising of the media continued in October when over two days the PM used the COVID-19 crisis to [attack](#) the Slovenia Press Agency (STA) and Slovenian media more broadly on Twitter, and then again during his attendance at the European Council in Brussels.

Concerns over the [increasing influence](#) of Hungarian business leaders linked to the ruling FIDESZ party over the Slovenian media landscape continued, when, on 1 October, the third largest media company in Slovenia, Planet TV, was sold to Hungarian pro-government media company TV2 Media, intensifying speculation over its future independence. As elsewhere in Europe, in October MFRR partners also monitored incidents linked to anti-government protests, where, on 6 October, a camera operator for Slovenian news outlet Nova24TV was surrounded by protesters during a weekly demonstration in the capital Ljubljana, leading to one man trying to force him to stop filming and [rip the camera](#) out of his hands.

In one of the most brazen SLAPP cases monitored by the MFRR partners anywhere in Europe in recent years, throughout August and September, Rok Snežič, tax expert and self-claimed advisor to Prime Minister Janša, filed a barrage of 39 [vexatious defamation lawsuits](#) against three journalists at the investigative news website Necenzurirano (Uncensored).

Thirteen lawsuits were launched against each journalist, Primož Cirman, Vesna Vukovic and Thomas Modica over their reporting on Snežič's business dealings over the last three years in portals siol.net and then necenzurirano.si, the outlet they founded in 2016. If found guilty, the journalists face fines or up to a year in prison.

Bulgaria

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: 6

Between July and October 2020, MFRR partners monitored several physical attacks and other media freedom violations in Bulgaria. Most incidents took place during three months of continuous public protests against government corruption that saw widespread police violence also directed at reporters and photojournalists. The failure of the authorities to hold individual officers to account, despite numerous MFRR advocacy appeals, is a cause of serious concern. Meanwhile, a new system restricting press access to politicians inside the new Parliament building raised fresh concerns over access to information and government transparency in one of the EU's [most corrupt states](#).

On 5 August, Paulina Paunova of Radio Free Europe and Genka Shikerova of TV1 Bulgaria were [attacked](#) by several men when they were trying to cover the conference of the Prime Minister's GERB

party held in Sofia. On other occasions, violence against the media came from police and security forces. On 2 September, international freelance journalist Dimitar Kenarov was [assaulted](#) by officers as he reported from the scene of large-scale, anti-government protests which were met by a heavy-handed response by law enforcement. Kenarov was handcuffed and kicked in the head by officers who also damaged his camera, despite repeatedly identifying himself as a journalist and producing press ID. MFRR advocacy led to the Bulgarian Ombudsman raising the issue of police brutality with the Government, however, no action was taken to identify the officer responsible.

Also on 2 September, journalists and photojournalists from various mass media including bTV were caught in the [indiscriminate use of tear gas](#) by riot police. One team member collapsed and others required medical treatment. That same day,

as protests raged outside the new National Assembly, inside the building a [restrictive new set of rules](#) governing the access of journalists inside the Parliament, was implemented by the Speaker. In response, more than 60 journalists, media workers and camera operators signed a petition condemning the development, arguing it reversed long established norms and seriously hindered their ability to carry out their professional duties. Despite pressure from international press freedom groups including the MFRR, the changes were not reversed.

Later that month, on 14 September, police in Sofia summoned crime reporter Martin Georgiev of the daily newspaper Sega for unjustified [questioning](#) over inquiries and images he'd sent to the Interior Ministry about the behaviour of police officers during the recent anti-government protests. The journalist was interrogated for half an hour without a lawyer present, in what his editor called a clear act of intimidation. These accusations were renewed over a month later when on 22 October, police again summoned Georgiev for [unjustified questioning](#) over his posts on his personal Facebook page.

Greece

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: 5

Media freedom in Greece came under increased MFRR scrutiny following the high-profile detention of a German documentary crew by police on the island of Samos and a number of other incidents linked to media's reporting on refugee and migrant issues were uploaded to the MMF platform. Police and law enforcement remain the primary source of media freedom violations documented in Greece involving incidents of violence and obstruction. Unlawful and prolonged detention has emerged as a common tactic to detain, discourage and harass journalists and media workers.

On 19 October 2020, a German media crew making a documentary about climate-induced migration were detained for seven

hours, strip searched and [held in jail without charges](#) by police at the Samos Police Department. Among them were photojournalist Manuel Tysarzik and Berlin-based video editor Larissa Rausch, who say they were also surveilled by plain clothes police officers after their release. No further communication was received by the crew from Greek authorities, leaving uncertainty over the status of any investigation or charges of "espionage" the police had previously threatened them with.

Other media outlets and actors have also faced similar acts of obstruction from Greek police. For five days starting on 9 September, journalists and photographers on the Greek island of Lesbos were [intermittently restricted](#) without reason

from reporting from where thousands of refugees and asylum seekers had been living without accommodation or sanitation. They had been trying to document the aftermath of the fires which destroyed large areas of the Moria Registration and Identification Center.

On other occasions, journalists faced physical violence from police. On 9 August, Turkish/Kurdish journalists Çağdaş Kaplan and Bercem Mordeniz were [forcibly detained and racially abused](#) by police while being held without charge for around eight hours, after they had tried to

report on the arrest of a man. The medical report shows traces of violence used against them. In another incident on 15 July, police in riot gear [harassed and intimidated](#) photojournalists covering an anti-fascist demonstration in the Greek capital Athens. On 26 July, Greek photojournalist Michalis Archontidis was detained by the security team of the Greek Prime Minister as he tried to take photos from a public beach of the PM's visit by helicopter to the island of Antiparos. Archontidis was held at a local police station for four and a half hours without justification during the PM's visit.

Hungary

Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period: 5

Hungarian independent media, already in turmoil due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, suffered further setbacks between July and October 2020 as the government led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and the FIDESZ party continued its decade-long assault on media freedom. During this time, the government furthered its gradual dismantling of media freedom and pluralism largely by manipulating the media market and state resources to punish critical media and reward pro-government outlets. While comparatively few individual alerts were monitored, their severity and significance were such that they were among the biggest blows to independent media in the country in years, cementing further control of the government over the coun-

try's media landscape already strained by the pandemic.

The most damaging example came in July when the editorial board and the majority of the journalists working at Index.hu, one of the country's most influential remaining independent outlets, resigned after their editor-in-chief, Szabolcs Dull, was fired by the company's CEO. It followed a [warning from the newspaper's staff](#) that the site was under "external pressure that could spell the end of our editorial staff as we know it". The statement made reference to a "proposed organisational overhaul" that journalists said threatened the outlet's values. The firing of Dull and the mass exodus that followed seriously weakened the newspaper. MFRR partners

noted how the situation at Index followed an all-too-familiar pattern, in which independent outlets are first starved of resources through the government's manipulation of the media market and then, once weakened, are conveniently placed in the hands of government-friendly owners who deliver the final death-blow, ousting editors and flipping the editorial line. While it is still unclear how Index's collapse will transform the Hungarian media landscape, observers believe it spells bad news for the long-term survival of independent media.

Another major blow came two months later when on 11 September, the National Media and Infocommunication Authority (NMHH) announced it would [not extend the license](#) for Klubrádió, the last remaining independent radio station in Hungary. The NMHH, which is controlled by FIDESZ, rejected the renewal application of Klubrádió, meaning that the Budapest-based commercial talk and news radio station's license will expire on 14 February, 2021, potentially forcing it off the airwaves for good. Justifying its ruling, the NMHH said that during the last seven years Klubradio had repeatedly violated Hungary's Media Law. András Arató, chairman of the Board of Directors of Klubrádió, previously denied the station had committed violations that could result in its license extension being rejected. The station had long been a target of Orbán due to its critical reporting.

The Hungarian government tries to avoid direct repression of the media preferring

more subtle forms of state capture of the media and the regulators. There are no jailed journalists, no dramatic newsroom raids, no trumped-up criminal prosecutions; physical violence against the media is rare. This changed on 22 and 26 October, when two journalists from independent Hungarian media outlets Átlátszó and Magyar Hang were [summoned](#) by police over the publication of video footage captured by a drone of armoured military vehicles at the estate belonging to a Hungarian billionaire and ally of the PM, Lőrinc Mészáros. Balázs Gulyás, a reporter for independent news outlet Magyar Hang, was summoned by police on 22 October, followed by Gabriella Horn, a reporter for investigative news outlet Átlátszó, on 26 October. The pair were questioned separately over the publication in their media outlets of video and images taken from a drone of the military-grade vehicles parked on the private property of Lőrinc Mészáros.

In September, MFRR partners also issued an [alert](#) over instructions to monitor Hungary's journalists abroad. In a letter dated 2 June, József Magyar, Deputy Secretary of State for Development of European Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade called on Hungarian embassies in the European Union to monitor and report on the professional visits of Hungarian journalists to the respective EU countries.

INTIMIDATING OR THREATENING JOURNALISTS (EFJ)

Intimidations and threats remain the most common type of attacks facing journalists in the MFRR region. Sadly, journalists may prefer to ignore them or think that nowadays, these are 'part of the job'. However, we know from experience that any kind of threats – whether online or offline – can lead to actual violence. We know it too well since both the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris and the murder of the Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia were preceded by years of verbal threats.

During the reporting period, MFRR recorded 52 alerts related to acts that intimidate or threaten approximately 101 journalists and media workers due to their work. These alerts include a wide range of attacks, such as death threats, verbal insults, police questioning, pressure to delete footage and legal threats. Such violations occurred in 17 of 33 countries in the MFRR region (EU Member States and Candidate Countries). Those experiencing a high number of protests such as Germany, Italy and Serbia lead the ranking since two-thirds of the attacks occurred during demonstrations and in public places.

Hostility from citizens

Among the reported cases, intimidation and threats mainly come from private indi-

viduals, either at protests or in general daily reporting. The prevalence of attacks of this nature has at times required drastic responses from actors including media companies. After equipment was damaged and persistent threats were made against the employees of the Dutch public broadcaster NOS, the management decided for security reasons to ensure that all journalists in the field were accompanied by security personnel and to [remove their logos](#) from their vehicles so that they would not be identified by the population. TV journalists and photographers – easily recognisable with the media companies' logos on their equipment – who cover popular movements are also on the front line in countries such as Italy, Germany and Serbia. Dozens of media professionals faced one or several of the following threats: [insults](#), [pressure](#), [stigmatisation](#) and attempts to [destroy](#) or [steal](#) journalistic equipment. In Germany, journalists were even threatened "[to be hanged](#)" by a protester. In Italy, where threats from organised crime groups are unfortunately commonplace, four alerts document well-known methods of intimidation such as visiting [journalist's homes](#), tagging [graffiti](#) on walls and [beatings](#) carried out in daylight. This alone suggests a specific climate where perpetrators are largely unafraid of the consequences of their violent actions.

Intimidation by the police

Law enforcement authorities have a duty to protect journalists in the performance of their work but as documented on Mapping Media Freedom, too often they fail to do so and are even a source of intimidation. Disproportionate [use of the force](#) in Spain, [illegitimate interrogation](#) over publications in Bulgaria, the [acquisition of data](#) in Hungary, and undue pressure to [delete footage](#) in Slovenia, are as many examples of intimidation that contribute to sustaining a chilling effect on media freedom in Europe. Several times in [Germany](#), [North Macedonia](#) and [Greece](#), police officers obstructed journalists from filming or accessing places of reporting, sometimes through the deployment of violence. When police officers enoble threats, or are themselves the source of the threat, not only are they restricting media freedom themselves, they are signalling that police officers may not be an adequate protection for journalists from other threats. In many countries, the police are the expected branch of government for journalists to report threats and if they are discouraged from doing so, media freedom will only decline.

Online harassment

With 14 alerts, online harassment is widespread throughout the MFRR region with social media being used to amplify and accelerate the distribution of targeted messages. It is often triggered by publications on polarising topics such as extremism,

conspiracy theories or religious or political matters. In the Netherlands, an alert involved a [string of online insults and threats](#) via Twitter over weeks. A data and investigative journalist covering conspiracy theories was mentioned approximately 605 times by conspiracy thinkers, where numerous messages including explicit threats were directed to him, as well as his wife when unknown individuals attempted to unlawfully access her social media platforms. Similarly, after her publication of an opinion piece on wearing the Islamic headscarf, Belgian journalist Florence Hainaut was the target of an [online harassment campaign](#) via Facebook and Twitter, including dozens of insulting and defamatory comments. Next to conspiracy theorists, far-right groups were the source of online attacks as well. The [president](#) of the Italian Federation of Journalists (FNSI) experienced such threats for having supported journalists questioning unverified reporting about immigrants.

Online harassment may spill over into the streets and result in self-censorship. In France, a leading private TV channel TF1 removed a report on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from its website, after being accused of publishing a "biased report". As a result, the channel received pressure both online and in front of the TV headquarter in Paris by hundreds of protestors. Subsequently, the author of the report, [Liseron Boudoul](#), received dozens of insulting messages including a death threat on social media, as well as emails and phone calls.

Gender-based violations

While this section is probably underreported, MFRR recorded five cases of women journalists being threatened or intimidated because of their gender. It includes threats of [rape](#) and of [physical and sexual violence](#) taking place primarily online. In Germany, TV presenter Maybrit Illner [received death threats](#) in a letter sent via email and signed by the NSU 2.0 (in reference to the National Socialist Underground) as part of a string of emails particularly sent to female politicians and women in public life. Further, again related to coverage of disinformation and conspiracy theories, a female journalist in the UK faced [misogynistic online harassment](#) and a number of online threats on different social media platforms.

SLAPPS: GAG LAWSUITS POSE CONTINUED THREAT TO PRESS FREEDOM – (IPI)

One of the most serious and growing threats to press freedom in EU Member States and Candidate Countries in recent years has been the use of Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (SLAPPs): a form of legal harassment commonly launched against journalists, media workers and outlets with the intention of intimidating and ultimately censoring those speaking out in the public interest. Often wielded by powerful or wealthy individuals, these vexatious suits are an abuse of the legal system in that they aim to burden the defendants with cumbersome legal fees and drag cases through lengthy court battles, rather than actually achieve justice. In countries across the MFRR region, from Malta and Poland, they have been abused in an attempt to gag investigative reporters and those involved in other forms of civil activism while simultaneously shielding the plaintiff from negative public attention. Often they involve numerous groundless lawsuits being launched at one time, requiring multiple time-consuming legal defences. Demands for damages are often extortionate. While some such cases have been brought by law firms on behalf of banks or business officials, others have been weaponised by ruling parties and their allies as part of longstanding campaigns to undermine the critical press. In whatever form they take, however, these

spurious lawsuits have seriously undermined media freedom and freedom of expression across Europe.

An important focus of the MFRR during the project has been to better understand, define and classify SLAPPs as a distinct legal threat, separate from other defamation and legal actions or threats, which have long posed challenges to media freedom in different countries. To do so, MFRR partners have worked closely with journalist associations on the ground to monitor emerging cases, analyse legal systems, and on some occasions provide direct legal support for defences. During the project, a number of serious cases have been documented that can be characterized as SLAPPs, in that they were issued not with the intention of winning, but rather of tying the defendant up in expensive legal battles, and were issued by powerful corporations or individuals whose resources often vastly outweighed those of the defendant. During the current reporting period, partners documented three such cases. The MFRR then raised these cases at the EU level through follow-up advocacy initiatives.

Among these cases was one of the most brazen SLAPP cases anywhere in Europe in recent years. Throughout August and September 2020, the MFRR issued an

alert on Mapping Media Freedom after three journalists working for the Slovenian investigative news website Necenzurirano (Uncensored) were hit by a [barrage of 39 lawsuits](#) by Rok Snežič, a Slovenian tax expert. Snežič, who claims to be an unofficial financial advisor to the Slovenian Prime Minister, issued 13 suits each against Primož Cirman, Vesna Vukovic and Thomas Modica, for their reporting on his business dealings including his alleged role in an illegal loan worth €450,000 provided to the governing party, SDS, in 2017. Snežič, who was previously convicted of fraud, money laundering and tax evasion, claimed the articles damage his reputation. The cases are ongoing but the journalists face fines and up to a year in prison if found guilty.

During the reporting period, media outlets across Europe continued to fight drawn out SLAPP cases. In October, alerts were published regarding spurious gagging cases against the Polish investigative newspaper OKO.press by plaintiffs including [judges](#) and [powerful business officials](#). Meanwhile, Poland's second-biggest daily newspaper, Gazeta Wyborcza, received over [55 legal threats and lawsuits](#) by a number of actors since 2015. Many of these have been launched by figures within the ruling Law and Justice party, including the party head Jarosław Kaczyński, the state television broadcaster, Telewizja Polska SA, and state-owned company KGHM Polska Miedź SA. These actions target the newspaper itself, the paper's publisher, Agora SA, its editor-in-chief of wyborcza.pl,

Dorota Goluch, and individual journalists, and are part of a long-standing attempt by PiS to weaken the influence of the critical newspaper.

In Croatia, meanwhile, MFRR partners are working with local journalists and their unions to document new cases which bear the hallmarks of SLAPPs against Telegram news portal, Virovitica.net, Index and the journalist Dora Kršul. As in Poland, these lawsuits were initiated by senior politicians – former Agriculture Minister Tomislav Tolušić and former Member of Parliament Branimir Glavaš – as well as University of Zagreb Rector, Damir Boras. Among the articles the journalists were sued for were reports about proceedings initiated against Tolušić for allegedly misreporting the size of his property, and a report about the former conviction of Nikolić. Monitoring here was followed by fact-finding calls with stakeholders and affected journalists on the ground, including the Croatian Journalist Association (CJA) which recently surveyed its members and collected information related to 905 active lawsuits against journalists and the media, with prosecutors claiming almost HRK 68 million (€9 million) in damages. It said many of these were SLAPPs and were commonly launched by politicians, business leaders, public figures, local government units, companies and even judges themselves.

Elsewhere, independent French journalist Inès Léraud is also preparing for her trial in a SLAPP case brought against her by business tycoon Jean Chéritel, CEO of the

Chéritel group, agro-industrial group in the Brittany region. The [defamation suit](#) followed the publication of her investigation into alleged illegal practices, workers' working conditions, and the CEO's attempts at silencing critical voices. The trial is due to take place on the 20th and 21st of January 2021. Chéritel previously sued a regional newspaper, the daily Le Télégramme, in 2015, over its reporting on the illegal employment of Bulgarian workers by the group. In January 2021 it was announced that Jean Chéritel was dropping the action days before it was due to start.

In September, the MFRR also issued an alert over the [25 defamation cases](#) which were still active against the Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia who was assassinated in 2017. Caruana Galizia, a well-known investigative journalist, was facing 47 active civil and criminal libel suits filed in various jurisdictions, including Malta and the United States, on the day she was murdered. She was sued for the first time in 1994 and during her professional life 67 defamation lawsuits were filed against her. Bearing the classic hallmarks of SLAPP cases, among the plaintiffs were the then Prime Minister Josef Muscat, his chief of staff, government ministers, state officials and prominent business leaders.

While each documented case is different, taken together the monitoring of these cases by the MFRR has helped form a clearer picture of the nature and seriousness that SLAPPs pose to media freedom

in Europe. MFRR partners have coordinated with activists, NGOs and human rights defenders and numerous journalist associations in individual countries to provide a [Europe-wide perspective](#). In addition, they have also guided advocacy work at the EU level and provided additional examples in the push by rights groups for an EU anti-SLAPP directive as part of the European Democracy Action Plan. These include action to prevent the filing of SLAPPs by allowing for the early dismissal of meritless cases, measures to penalize abuse by reversing the costs of proceedings, and practical support to targeted journalists. The cases documented by MFRR have shown the dangers of allowing the legal loopholes which permit the abuse of SLAPPs to remain open. Until action is taken to close them, they will continue to create a chilling effect on freedom of expression and legitimate journalistic work for years to come.

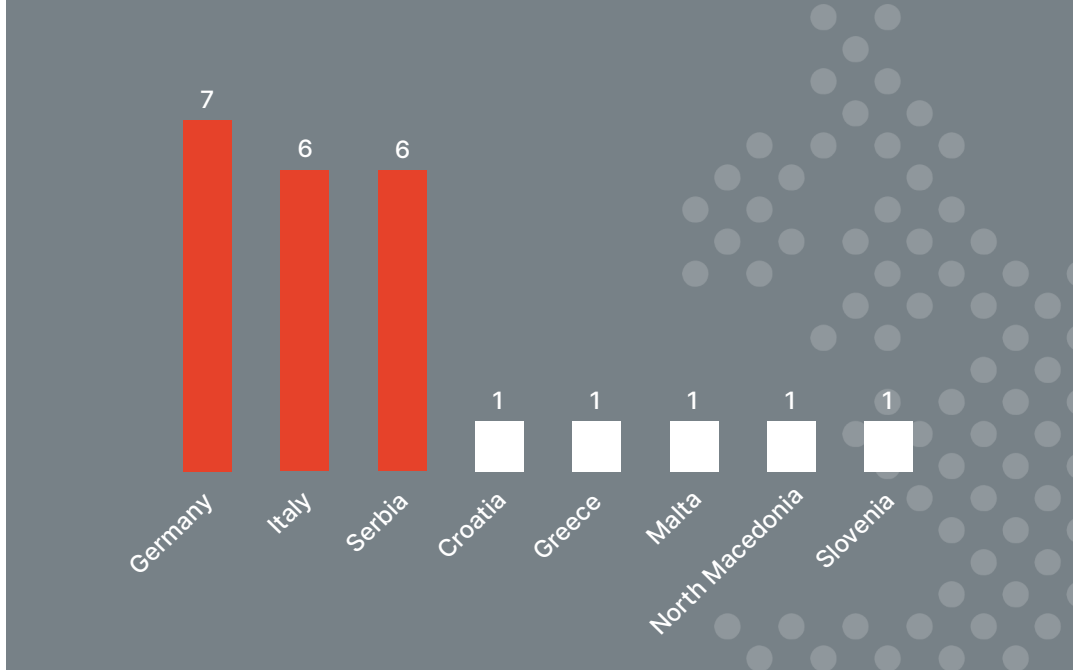
COVID-19

As highlighted in the [first monitoring report](#) Mapping Media Freedom: A Four-Month Snapshot, between March and June 2020, 42 alerts were published and verified on Mapping Media Freedom that related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Here is a section of the analysis compiled by the International Press Institute:

'MFRR partners documented press freedom violations linked to the coronavirus in 13 of the EU's 34 different Member States and Candidate Countries. These included new laws on "fake news", restrictions on access to information and physical attacks on journalists seeking to cover various aspects of the pandemic, including demonstrations.'

This highlights the central pressure facing journalists and media workers; not only is the pandemic a public health threat in of itself, as well as a threat to the income and economic viability of media outlets, it is a situation that necessitates state intervention, stokes public anger and reinforces existing divisions that can hinder and damage media freedom. This situation has not subsided. In fact, in the reporting period between July and the end of October, 24 alerts have been published on MMF from eight EU Member States and Candidate Countries, which relate to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Here is a breakdown of all MMF alerts related to the impact of the COVID-19 pan-



dem broken down via country for the reporting period of (July until the end of October 2020):

In the previous report, EFJ and IPI analysed the impact of the pandemic on media freedom and the increasing dangers of journalists covering protests. In this reporting period, protests connected to COVID-19, more specifically organised to oppose government responses to the pandemic, continue to be a significant threat to journalists and media workers.

Out of the 24 alerts, 15 took place during protests in Germany, Italy and Serbia. These alerts emanate broadly from two sources: private individuals taking part in or observing the protest or from police officers or representatives of security services deployed to maintain order during the protest. Due to the direct on-the-ground nature of the majority of reporting on protests, the majority of the threats fa-

cing journalists and media workers were threats of or actual physical violence against the media actor (or their equipment) or verbal threats, including abusing and harassing language, threats of potential violence, as well as sexual harassment directed at journalists. This latter group of threats were enforced by a significant anti-media sentiment that led to threats being made in a protest in [Berlin](#) to hang journalists and a journalist in [Rome](#) being threatened by a protester shouting 'You piece of shit, you'll die shot' before having to be escorted away by a police officer.

The alerts from Serbia, Italy and Germany also highlighted an escalation of risk, from threats and harassment to physical violence that left a number of journalists and media workers across the MFRR region in need of medical attention. Over the days between 7th and 11th July in Serbia, 28 journalists and media workers were attacked or threatened by protesters and

police officers during protests aimed at the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As outlined in a previous chapter, during these protests, there was a disturbing trend of journalists being attacked even after presenting themselves as journalists to police officers. Žkica Stevanović of the Beta news agency, Milica Božinović, a journalist for the Nova.rs news portal, and Igor Stanojević were all attacked by police officers, with Stanojević also being arrested for his reporting. Violence was not only deployed by police officers. A number of incidents, including the punching of a cameraman from the Tanjug news agency by a young male protester and the hospitalisation of Beta News Agency reporters Milos Miskov and Svetlana Dojcinovic after they were pelted by bricks and stones, demonstrated the role of protesters in attacking journalists.

Similar attacks on Paolo Fratter, a reporter for Sky TG 24, and camera operators, Vincenzo Triente and Fabio Giulianelli who were attacked and had glass bottles and stones thrown in Naples and the physical assault of a Spiegel TV camera crew made up of Adrian Altmaier, Adrian-Basil Mueller and Henrik Neumann in Germany demonstrates how the same anti-media sentiment that encourages the verbal harassment of journalists can morph unchecked into physical acts of violence. All these incidents increase the expected risk for covering protests, further dissuading journalists from carrying out their work, while also chilling future coverage. If these threats are perceived as being part of the price journalists are to

pay reporting in this manner, this will have an enduring and detrimental impact on media freedom.

However, the threats do not end with protests. In Italy, Serbia, North Macedonia and Croatia, reporting was interrupted by private individuals or police officers and journalists were threatened as a result of their work. Both Bijana Sekulovska, the editor of the online news outlet NOVA TV in North Macedonia and Roberta Di Matteo and camera operator Ottavio Chiaradia working for the regional Radiotelevisione Italiana (Rai) program in Italy were prevented from carrying out their work, either by police officers who threatened legal action or private individuals who used force to prevent reporting. In August, two perpetrators broke into the house of Jeton Ismaili, editor of the Albanian language FOLonline news portal in Serbia, and threatened to kill him and his family. Two men broke in, insulted and then threatened the editor's wife for around five minutes while their three young children were present. According to Ismaili, the two men who broke in were neighbours and known to the family and may have been related to individuals named in an article he published about the suspected death from COVID-19 of two elderly brothers.

All incidents did not arise from individuals or groups critical of responses to the pandemic. In Croatia, private individuals approached N1 journalist Matea Dominikovic and cameraman Ivan Teskera who were preparing to carry out an interview with

Professor Alemka Markotić, Director of the Clinic for Infectious Diseases. The individuals aggressively accosted the journalists for not wearing a mask. While N1 later stressed that the interview was conducted in line with all government health measures about social distancing, the individuals, who were walking their dog, instructed it to "stand in a pose in which he is waiting for an order to attack". Even without the complexities of reporting on protests, public space, especially in light of travel restrictions brought about to quell the spread of the pandemic, were highly charged situations which undermined journalists' ability to report freely.

In Slovenia, Malta and Greece, a number of state processes or representatives, including televised government briefings, state funding or hostility from elected officials warrant scrutiny and criticism. Throughout 2020, [Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša](#) has repeatedly targeted media outlets and actors, oftentimes directed at Slovenia Press Agency (STA). In the reporting period, this abuse turned to scapegoating media outlets for hampering the states ability to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, labelling media coverage as 'fake news...denying the danger' and calling STA, a 'national disgrace'. Fake news has also become a common refrain, not solely for labelling mis/disinformation, but for singling out critical coverage. To combat the economic damage to media outlets brought by the pandemic, the Greek government announced a €20 million state advertising scheme that would provide media with revenue through state

advertising. While these schemes are needed, if they are administered unequally they can amplify a skewed media landscape and starve critical outlets. When the [Greek government released the full list of 1,232 entities](#) who received funding through this scheme, a number of outlets critical of the government including Documento, who government spokesman Stelios Petsas accused of sharing 'fake news', received very small amounts compared to government-friendly websites, despite having far larger circulation and readership and more employees.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the requirement of states to communicate clearly with the public, share public health information and respond to questions from the press. As outlined in the previous monitoring report, this process has been easily skewed to ignore critical outlets and reformulate the relationship between the state and the press. On 16 October 2020, the Maltese government hosted a press conference to announce new developments in the state's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was broadcast live on TVM, a network operated by the national broadcaster, Public Broadcasting Services. However, as soon as deputy Prime Minister Chris Fearné asked to take journalists' questions, TVM stopped the live broadcast. When questioned about this, and a similar incident in August, the Broadcasting Authority justified it on the grounds that it was legally obliged to prevent "unexpected questions" which may undermine the impartiality of the broadcast and turn a public health broadcast

into a party political statement." The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the need for factual, impartial and robust information to be shared to the public, by both state entities and scientific bodies managing the pandemic response. The press plays a vital role in this process. If they are manipulated to avoid greater scrutiny or entrench a pro-Government narrative, it is the public and their trust in institutions that suffers.

The alerts highlighted here demonstrate that violations to media freedom tied to the pandemic are not isolated to the initial shock to the system that occurred when the pandemic reached Europe in the Spring of 2020. In fact, they have endured as the pandemic has continued to spread and as states have modified, reinforced or developed their responses. While the number of alerts in this report is lower than the previous monitoring report, the continued relationship between the pandemic and violations of media freedom cannot be ignored. There is a real threat that as these threats continue, they may become embedded into the relationship between the state, the press and the public and form part of a new reconfigured media environment that could outlast the pandemic. In this manner, the enduring legacy of COVID-19 may be long, hard to track and forever damaging to the role of journalists, media workers and outlets to inform the public, scrutinise power and encourage dialogue.

CONCLUSIONS

This second monitoring report continues on from the first in documenting a fragmented and concerning picture of media freedom across EU Member States and Candidate Countries. While COVID-19 and the dangers of covering protests endure, continuing to reconfigure the media landscape, the impact of legal actions and threats and the complex interplay between powerful individuals, politicians, business leaders and law firms to threaten media actors into silence paints a more complex picture.

Read together, these reports map a landscape where threats to media freedom take many forms, whether physical/psychological, legal or related to attempts to censor journalists, from a wide range of sources including state and non-state actors, for too many reasons to accurately represent here. However, a number of key themes emerge that require immediate attention. A weakened national commitment to media freedom is not relegated to states with fragile democracies alone. In fact, a number of worrying trends in countries such as Germany and France demonstrate that established democracies are susceptible to attacks against journalists, a degraded media environment and inadequate responses from relevant authorities. This report reaffirms the findings from the first monitoring project that responsibility for protecting media freedom is a responsibility for

every country in the MFRR region. No country should shirk that.

An increasing anti-media sentiment and climate of polarisation has emboldened individuals across the MFRR region to dehumanise, demonise, threaten and harass journalists and media workers, solely due to their work. Whether they are perceived to be 'fake news peddlers', anti-Government agents, foreign operatives or opposition to dominant ideologies, this climate sets the foundation for further threats, including physical violence or even murder. This has long been part of the media environment, so much so that many journalists come to expect it as a daily risk they have to endure, but the broader impact on media freedom cannot be ignored. To address attacks on media actors, states need to combat this anti-media sentiment and reiterate the importance of a free press in a functioning democracy, while all the time ensuring that all threats are investigated thoroughly and robustly. This sends a signal to journalists that they are valued and able to continue their work and another signal to those seeking to target journalists that they will face justice.

Protecting journalists requires strong institutions and laws. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) and other forms of vexatious lawsuits capitalise on jurisdictions where these are

weakened to ensure that powerful vested interests can control press coverage and intimidate journalists into silence. The scale of these legal threats, especially when multiple suits are brought against individual outlets, such as the cases of *Gazeta Wyborcza* in Poland and *Nenczurirano* in Slovenia, makes a coordinated EU-level response more necessary than ever. When outlets do not have access to in-house or affordable legal representation and when powerful entities, oftentimes including politicians, such as the trend in Croatia, are able to send out threats or pre-action letters with little jeopardy or opposition. A free press is not only a press where journalists are unafraid of physical attacks as documented in this report. A free press is only truly free when journalists and outlets are undisturbed from legal processes established only to delay, demotivate and financially cripple, as well as a legal environment that ensures they can mount an adequate defence and all vexatious suits are thrown out at an early stage.

The shadow cast by COVID-19 is long and remains unclear. It is not yet known how and when it will end, and what state media freedom will be in once the immediate impact of pandemic subsides. As stated in the previous chapter, as the pandemic has continued, media freedom violations connected to it, the state's response and public protests has continued to be captured on MMF. While the COVID-19 pandemic is a novel and unique crisis (or perhaps a set of interconnected crises) the continuation of attacks and threats to

journalists and media workers points to an alarming realisation: repressing journalists and restricting media freedom is not isolated to the abrupt commencement of a crisis, they continue as the state's response becomes more structured and long term. This continuation sets the foundation for this new media environment to endure long after the immediate effects of the pandemic subside.

A number of alerts, including the manipulation of public visibility of press questions during government press conferences, state advertising administered to reward or punish media outlets and the apparent acceptance of anti-media sentiment in public protest movements all can endure to be reused in all future crises or situations in need of significant press attention and public awareness raising. The direct and indirect impact of the pandemic on media freedom will be hard to monitor in their entirety. A significant commitment of states to transparency, openness, as well as a willingness to evaluate the effects of their responses will be vital to ensure a diminished media is not the legacy to these unprecedented times.

MEDIA FREEDOM RAPID RESPONSE

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



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