MEDIA FREEDOM
RAPID RESPONSE

MAPPING MEDIA FREEDOM

MONITORING REPORT

2023

Content

MEDIA FREEDOM RAPID RESPONSE

The Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) tracks, monitors and reacts 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 alliance led by the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF) including ARTICLE 19 Europe, the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), Free Press Unlimited (FPU), International Press Institute (IPI) and CCI/Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa (OBC Transeuropa). The project commenced in 2020 and is funded by the European Commission.

www.mfrr.eu

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MAPPING MEDIA FREEDOM ALERTS

Introduction

Hacking attacks, abusive lawsuits, insults by public authorities, and violence when reporting at demonstrations. These are just some of the most prominent threats that journalists and media workers faced in Europe in 2023. From January until December 2023, the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) recorded 1,117 media freedom violations in EU Member States and candidate countries involving 1,620 individuals or media outlets. Of those, 602 were recorded in the European Union and 515 in candidate countries.

In the EU, the main type of incidents recorded were verbal attacks (involving 35.9% of all alerts), followed by legal incidents (24.9%) such as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), to which this report dedicates a thematic chapter in what became a decisive year
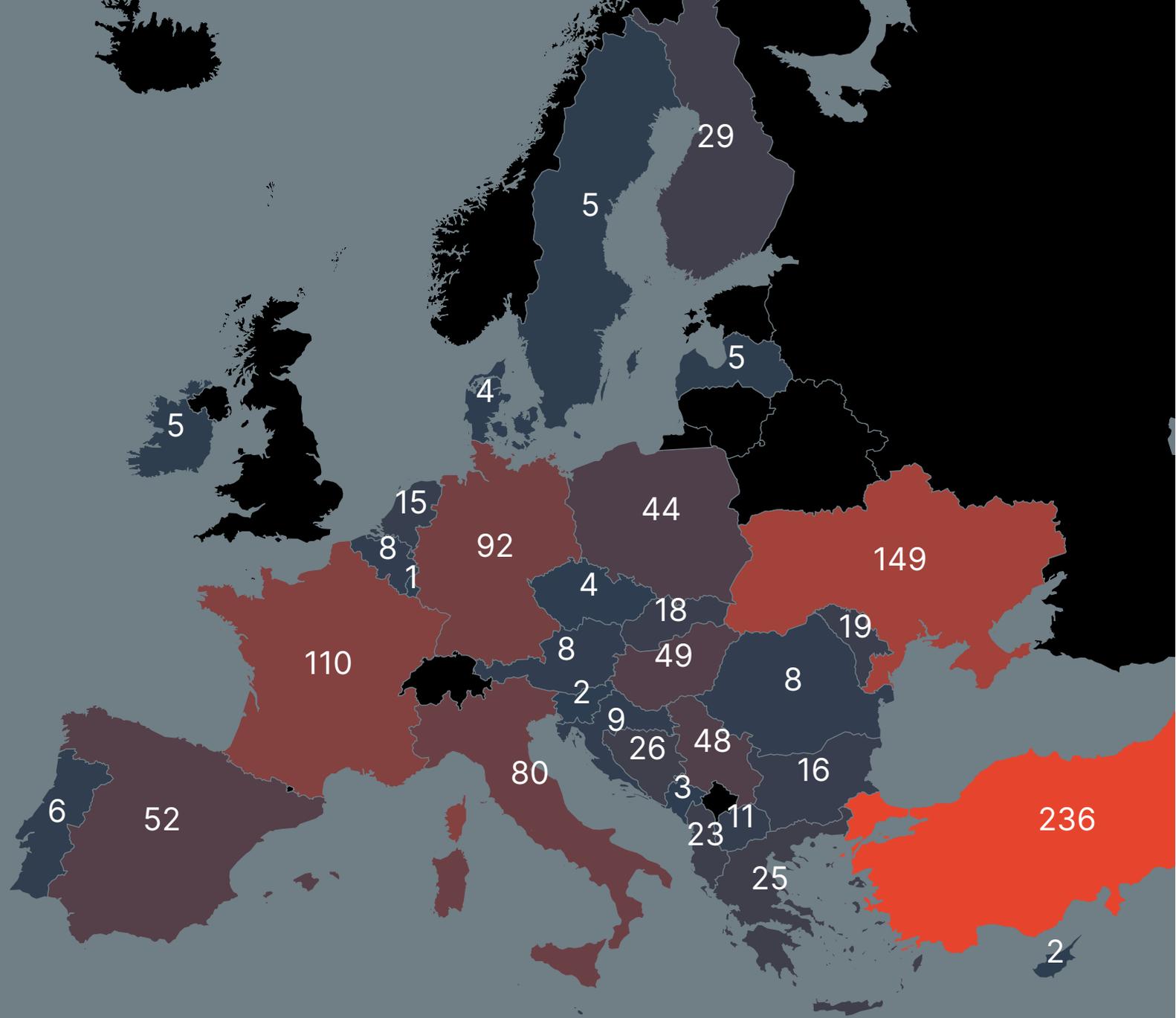
(EU MS + CC including Ukraine and Moldova)

to take the final steps to adopt an EU anti-SLAPP directive.

20.6% of incidents in the EU involved some kind of physical attack, notably during the coverage of protests. The MFRR also recorded a considerable number of cases involving attacks to property (17.4%) and censorship (15.9%), such as blocked access to events or press conferences. The main source of attacks remained private individuals as in 2022 (almost 33% of cases), worryingly followed by public officials (17.9%) and police and state security (12.6%).

Candidate countries followed a similar pattern, although overall in these states the most common type of attacks were legal incidents (29.7%), followed by verbal attacks such as harassment or insults (27.2%). As for perpetrators, private individuals were also the main attackers of journalists and media workers (17.9%), but they were followed by police and state security (17.7%) and the courts and judicial system (15.9%).

The current monitoring report offers an overview of the media freedom situation across the EU and candidate countries in 2023, starting with a thematic chapter on the war in Ukraine and its repercussions on media freedom over two years after the full-scale war started. The second thematic chapter focuses on the rise of hacking and Distributed Denial of Service attacks, which were prominent in Hungary and other countries.

The current report dedicates its third thematic chapter to the rise of attacks against journalists by public authorities and politicians, which aim to undermine their credibility and in doing so hinder journalists' abil-

ity to carry out their work. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, a fourth thematic chapter focuses on abusive lawsuits and SLAPPs in the region.

The monitoring report also covers the media freedom situation in candidate countries, where the MFRR registered the most severe violations of media freedom: 3 deaths of media workers. 2 of those took place in Ukraine and a third in Albania, where a security guard was killed in a firearm attack on the premises of Albanian television station Top Channel.

The report is divided into the following chapters: an overview offering data and graphics about the press freedom situation in the EU and in candidate countries in 2023, four thematic sections with quantitative and qualitative analysis, and country reports offering a summary of the most relevant threats in the following EU countries: France, the Netherlands, Italy, Hungary, Spain, Finland, and Slovakia; and in the following candidate countries: Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Turkey. 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), as part of the joint Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) project which monitors and supports journalists, media workers, and platforms that have been threatened. The project is funded by the European Commission. Past reports can be accessed on the MapMF website, and the alerts for this report can be accessed through the Alert Explorer here, which is constantly updated and collects and visualises all alerts documented by the monitoring partners.

AFP journalist Arman Soldin, who was later killed by the Russian military, walks in a trench as he covers the war in Ukraine, March, 2023.
picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS | Aris Messinis

Overview

Main types of attacks in EU Member States

124	216	105	150	96
20.6%	35.9%	17.4%	24.9%	15.9%
PHYSICAL	VERBAL	PROPERTY	LEGAL	CENSORSHIP

Spotlight on the European Union

Journalists and media actors in European Union Member States 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. This section shows how many alerts involved a certain type of attack. The types of attacks are grouped into five main categories with detailed information provided below.

Physical: In 1 out of 5 incidents (20.6%, 124 alerts), media actors were physically attacked. In 48 of those cases (38%), media actors were injured.
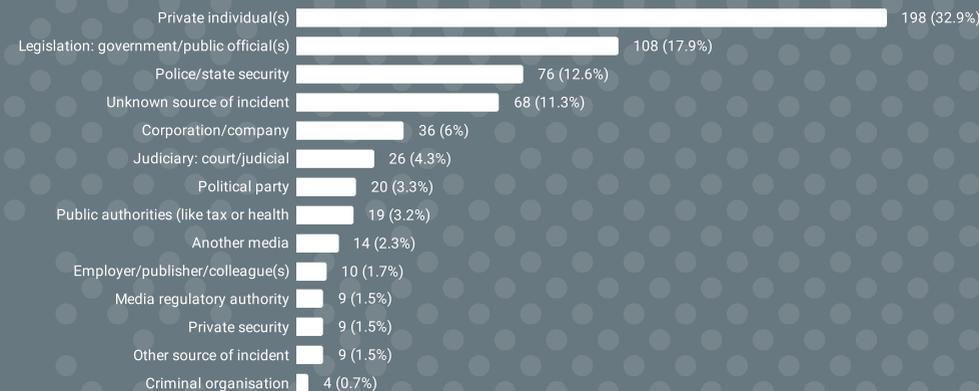
Verbal: In more than 1 out of 3 incidents (35.9%, 216 alerts), media actors were verbally abused. This includes intimidation/threats (18.6%, 113 alerts), discrediting (12.3%, 74 alerts), insult/abuse (42 alerts), harassment (20), sexual verbal harassment (7), and bullying/trolling targeting media actors (2).

Property: In more than 1 out of 6 incidents (17.4%, 105 alerts), property was attacked. This includes equipment (51 alerts), hacking/DDoS attacks (29), attacks to general property like cars or houses (22), or personal belongings (5).
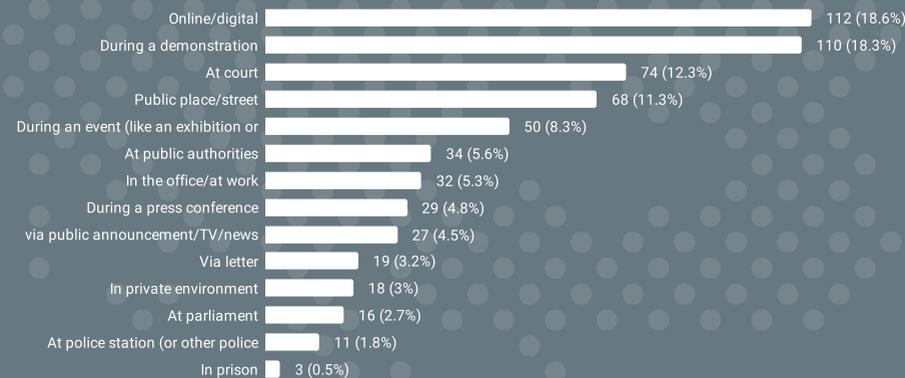
Legal: In 1 out of 4 incidents (24.9%, 150 alerts), media actors faced legal consequences. This includes, amongst others, defamation (30), civil lawsuits (29), legal measures like laws restricting press and media freedom (23), arrest/detention/imprisonment (17), surveillance and interception of journalistic data (13), and criminal charges (12).

Censorship: In nearly 1 out of 6 incidents (16.0%, 44 alerts), media actors faced censorship. This includes, amongst others, blocked access to information (e.g. blocked websites or no answers to enquiries) (66 alerts), arbitrary denial of accreditation or registration (including blocked access to events or press conferences) (33 alerts), and commercial interference (18).

Sources of attacks in EU Member States

Source	Value
Private individual(s)	198 (32.9%)
Legislation: government/public official(s)	108 (17.9%)
Police/state security	76 (12.6%)
Unknown source of incident	68 (11.3%)
Corporation/company	36 (6%)
Judiciary: court/judicial	26 (4.3%)
Political party	20 (3.3%)
Public authorities (like tax or health	19 (3.2%)
Another media	14 (2.3%)
Employer/publisher/colleague(s)	10 (1.7%)
Media regulatory authority	9 (1.5%)
Private security	9 (1.5%)
Other source of incident	9 (1.5%)
Criminal organisation	4 (0.7%)

Contexts of attacks in EU Member States

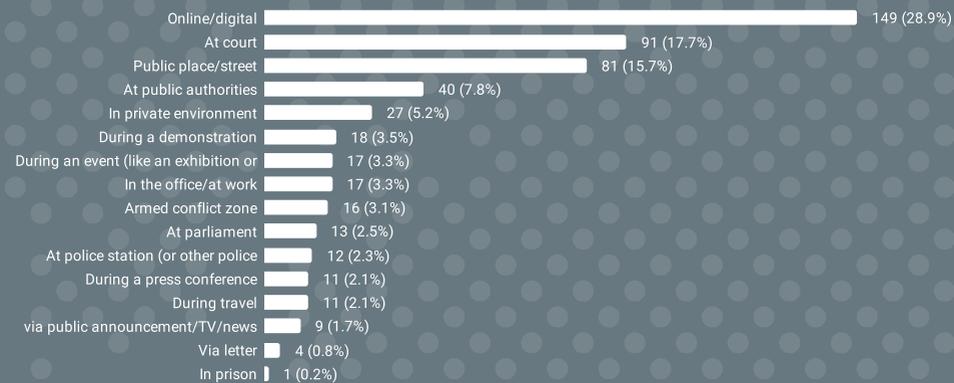| Context	Value
Online/digital	112 (18.6%)
During a demonstration	110 (18.3%)
At court	74 (12.3%)
Public place/street	68 (11.3%)
During an event (like an exhibition or	50 (8.3%)
At public authorities	34 (5.6%)
In the office/at work	32 (5.3%)
During a press conference	29 (4.8%)
via public announcement/TV/news	27 (4.5%)
Via letter	19 (3.2%)
In private environment	18 (3%)
At parliament	16 (2.7%)
At police station (or other police	11 (1.8%)
In prison	3 (0.5%)

Source: mappingmediafreedom.org

The data comprises documented Mapping Media Freedom alerts between 01/01/2023 and 31/12/2024 for European Union member states, based on the documentation status of 07/03/2024. One incident and thus 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 being 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.

Spotlight on Candidate Countries

Main types of attacks in EU candidate countries

75	140	54	153	108
14.6%	27.2%	10.5%	29.7%	21%

| PHYSICAL | VERBAL | PROPERTY | LEGAL | CENSORSHIP |

* Excluding Ukraine and Moldova

Sources of attacks in EU candidate countries

Private individual(s)	92 (17.9%)
Police/state security	91 (17.7%)
Judiciary: court/judicial	82 (15.9%)
Unknown source of incident	69 (13.4%)
Legislation: government/public official(s)	65 (12.6%)
Military/armed forces	29 (5.6%)
Public authorities (like tax or health	25 (4.9%)
Media regulatory authority	20 (3.9%)
Political party	14 (2.7%)
Another media	9 (1.7%)
Corporation/company	8 (1.6%)
Private security	7 (1.4%)
Other source of incident	4 (0.8%)
Employer/publisher/colleague(s)	3 (0.6%)

Contexts of attacks in EU candidate countries

Online/digital	149 (28.9%)
At court	91 (17.7%)
Public place/street	81 (15.7%)
At public authorities	40 (7.8%)
In private environment	27 (5.2%)
During a demonstration	18 (3.5%)
During an event (like an exhibition or	17 (3.3%)
In the office/at work	17 (3.3%)
Armed conflict zone	16 (3.1%)
At parliament	13 (2.5%)
At police station (or other police	12 (2.3%)
During a press conference	11 (2.1%)
During travel	11 (2.1%)
via public announcement/TV/news	9 (1.7%)
Via letter	4 (0.8%)
In prison	1 (0.2%)

Source: mappingmediafreedom.org

The data comprises documented Mapping Media Freedom alerts between 01/01/2023 and 31/12/2023 for European Union member states, based on the documentation status of 07/03/2024. One incident and thus 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 being 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.
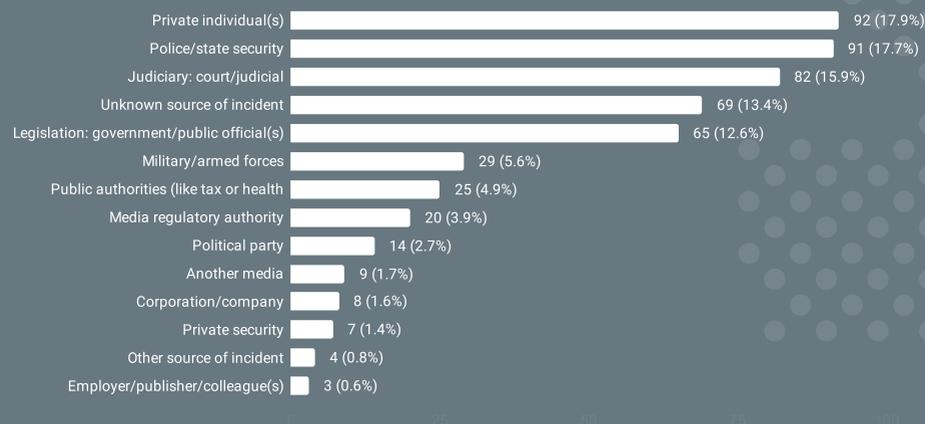
Journalists photograph the damaged building in Kyiv, after Russia's missile attack.
picture alliance / ZUMAPRESS.com | Aleksandr Gusev

Ukraine: Media freedom under continued attack

As the war in Ukraine continues, media freedom remains under attack

After 2022, a tragic year for Ukraine and Ukrainian journalism, 2023 remained a year of continued violent and in some cases deadly attacks against journalists and media workers in the country. While war-related violence against journalists became less frequent as the conflict continued, physical attacks, some of them lethal, still occurred at regular intervals during the monitoring period. The prospect of high-intensity hostilities returning to Ukrainian regions far from the frontline meant that the environment for journalists in the country remained one of the most dangerous in Europe.

The MFFR began monitoring Ukraine as soon as the invasion began on 24 February 2022. Since then, Ukraine officially became a candidate country for the European Union, in June 2022. In November 2023, the European Commission recommended that the European Council give the green light to begin talks on Ukraine's accession to the bloc. This recommendation was approved by the Council in December.

With 149 alerts registered throughout 2023 affecting a total of 220 different media entities, the number of situations in which the rights of Ukrainian journalists were violated has remained similar in comparison with the previous year, when 147 alerts were recorded.

Journalists still targeted in zone of armed conflict

In 2023, two media workers were killed by the Russian military while reporting on the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On 26 April, Ukrainian producer [Bohdan Bitik](#) was shot dead near Kherson, while Corrado Zunino, the Italian journalist for whom he was working as a fixer, [was wounded](#) in the same incident. Two weeks later, AFP reporter [Arman Soldin](#) was killed near Chasiv Yar, in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region. As such, Ukraine was the only European Union Member State or candidate country that registered deaths of journalists in 2023.

Non-lethal physical attacks were still not uncommon over the past year in Ukraine, with media workers coming under Russian fire, airstrikes, and artillery fire in [fourteen other incidents](#). In ten of those incidents the journalists who came under attack [were injured](#). The solidification of the frontlines in the war, the greater protection planning afforded to journalists by their media organisations, and stricter rules on media reporting in certain warzones by Ukrainian authorities are all understood to have played a role in lowering the number of journalistic casualties compared to 2022, when nine journalists or media workers were [killed](#) in relation to their work.

The deaths and the serious injuring of journalists in Ukraine illustrate the continued dangers faced by media workers reporting on the war. For this reason, MFRR partners continue to stand in solidarity with journalists in Ukraine carrying out their duties while under prolonged attack by Russia.

Fewer physical attacks, more cases of censorship

Overall, the number of [physical assaults](#) on journalists in 2023 (29) was significantly lower than in 2022, when 67 such incidents were recorded. On the other hand, instances of censorship, including by Ukrainian authorities using the war as a pretext to refuse journalists access to information, were on the rise, with 39 such documented incidents [recorded in 2023](#), as opposed to [20 in 2022](#).

In [2022](#), there were significantly more legal incidents targeting journalists than in [2023](#). In 2022, the [largest share of these](#) (11) were cases of arrests, detention, and imprisonment, with Russian occupying forces responsible for nearly all of these. [Two of those cases](#) were related to the arrest of Crimean Tatar journalists in Russian-occupied Crimea.

In other categories, the pressure put on Ukrainian journalists throughout 2023 was similar to the situation in the previous year.

In line with this shift in the nature of attacks, fewer incidents in Ukraine were recorded in a [zone of armed conflict](#) (16), [as compared to 2022](#) (75). As a result, military and police forces, respectively responsible for [54](#) and [27](#) attacks in 2022, were behind only [28](#) and [nine](#) incidents respectively in 2023.

When it comes to the context of attacks, in 2023 significantly more of these took place online ([75](#), as opposed to [28 in 2022](#)). This is due to a rising number of hacking and DDoS cyber attacks recorded, as well as a rise in censorship decisions, which were most often communicated to journalists online.

Russian forces still responsible for most – and gravest – attacks

MFRR data clearly shows that in 2023, while Ukraine continued to struggle with media freedom issues of its own, it also found it-

self in the exceptional situation of not being responsible for a large share of violations committed on its own territory. In fact, unknown perpetrators were behind 30.2% of incidents recorded (45 alerts). Nearly all of these happened online (42), with the majority being cyber and hacking attacks, most of which were carried out to discredit or intimidate Ukrainian news websites as part of Russia's operations of psychological warfare. Another 18.8% of violations were committed by the military, with Russia being responsible for most cases – of the 28 incidents registered over the past year in this category, 24 were perpetrated by the Russian military, while the Ukrainian army was responsible for four. 22 out of the 24 violations committed by Russia were armed attacks on journalists and media infrastructure, while two were cases of censorship. All four incidents for which the Ukrainian military was responsible were cases of limitations on access to information due to martial law regulations.

Increasing cases of censorship by Ukrainian authorities, notably at local level

While risks to the physical safety of journalists and other challenges linked to Russia's invasion remained of prime concern in

DDoS attacks and hacking

The number of cases of hacking and DDoS attacks targeting the media doubled in 2023 compared to 2022 with 61 alerts targeting 112 persons or entities related to the me-

Ukraine, in parallel the media faced challenges created by domestic actors. In some cases, these were also indirectly caused by the war, especially with regards to martial law, which remained in place in Ukraine. In 2023, attacks against journalists working away from the frontlines were most often linked to censorship, with 39 such cases registered in Ukraine. This mainly included cases in which access to press conferences and other events was blocked, and in which authorities denied accreditation or did not respond to journalists' enquiries. An almost equally worrying tendency was the use of verbal attacks on journalists: in 2023, 41 cases of serious verbal attacks were registered in Ukraine, mainly consisting of intimidation, threatening, and discrediting. Attacks related to media property also took a toll: this included 23 major hacking or DDoS attacks. Lastly, MFRR partners registered eleven legal incidents, representing 7.4% of all attacks in Ukraine over the past six months.

Overall, Ukraine in 2023 saw a continuation of the serious media freedom challenges observed in 2022. While over the past year there were comparatively fewer physical attacks on journalists in the context of the war, the danger that these will return has not waned.

dia. Most of them were Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks, which aim to disrupt websites by bombarding them with an avalanche of connection attempts. This

generally results in limited or impossible access for several hours to media outlets' websites, which have to devote some financial resources to return to normal operations. Last year, media outlets based in Ukraine (23 alerts) and Hungary (17 alerts) were targeted the most, followed by Poland (3 alerts), Serbia (3), and Spain (3). While motives are not always clear, many of the cases documented on MapMF showed that DDoS are used as retaliation for reports denouncing the DDoS attacks themselves or related to the war in Ukraine.

Among the many strains faced by Ukrainian media last year were digital attacks against their websites, such as Ukrinform, Nik Life, and Hromadske Radio. In addition, two journalists' organisations – the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine (NUJU) and the Institute of Mass Information (IMI) on two occasions – were also hit by similar attacks. Ukrainian journalists' personal Telegram accounts or email accounts were the

subject of hacking attempts. Telegram was additionally used by hackers to spread fake announcements such as fake instructions in case of an air raid.

In the majority of cases, the perpetrators behind the DDoS attacks were not known. When the attacks were claimed or when the perpetrators were identified, they often emanated from Russian hackers. Halychyna FM posted screenshots from a pro-Kremlin Telegram channel known as The People's Cyber Army ('Narodnaya Cyber-Armiya', in Russian), which on 01 March asked its over 6,000 followers to attack the Ukrainian radio station. Examples from other countries suggested the responsibility of Russian hacker groups in at least three other DDoS attacks. In Albania and Moldova, Cyber Army targeted Shqiptarja.com and Report TV's websites and Newsmaker.md, Ziarul de Gardă and Nokta.md. In Spain, the pro-Russian hacker group "No name 057" claimed responsibility for the campaign of cyberattacks

against websites of Spanish news outlets, companies, and authorities in retaliation for the shipment of military aid to Ukraine. In the Czech Republic, the website of the public radio Český Rozhlas (CRo) crashed for several hours. While the source of the attack was not clear, the timing suggested that it was related to the conference that CRo organised on that day about the role of the media in Ukraine in light of Russian aggression.

17 alerts documenting DDoS attacks targeting more than 40 media outlets were documented in Hungary in 2023, which represents a considerable increase compared to 2022. One of the large scale attacks took place in April, in two waves: seven and five media outlets were targeted multiple times in what appeared to be a coordinated action. Some websites were down for hours as the servers crashed. The attacks were not claimed by any group or individual. While the specific motive of these attacks remains unconfirmed, the majority of portals targeted in the DDoS attacks included many of the country's leading independent media, including Telex , 444.hu, Magyar Hang and Népszava, which are critical of the government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. International media companies hit by hackers included Forbes Hungary.

With more than 40 different media websites targeted, some multiple times, this campaign of DDoS attacks is understood to be one of the broadest cyber-attacks against an independent media community within a European Union Member State to date.

Media1, a website specialising in media, and its sister paper vipcast.hu, were in turn affected by DDoS attacks for reporting on the DDoS targeting other media outlets. Requests for access to data on the platforms' servers reached 1.2 billion requests in a matter of hours. It temporarily made the two websites inaccessible to readers. An investigation by Media1 concluded that crime marks left in the server logs suggested a political motive. Another message left in the code during another attack a few days earlier, for the attention of Media1's editor-in-chief Daniel Szalay, seemed to confirm the hypothesis of a coordinated campaign against independent media outlets.

The International Press Institute (IPI), an MFRR partner, was also targeted with a DDoS attack last September, bringing IPI's website down multiple times. The scale of the attack increased after persistently overcoming security countermeasures put in place by the organisation's IT team. The incident occurred just two days after the publication of IPI's report warning about "an unprecedented wave of cyberattacks" targeting mainly independent Hungarian media. An in-depth forensic analysis, commissioned by IPI and conducted by the NGO Qurium, revealed that at least part of the cyberattack on IPI was carried out through the same network of proxy companies also involved in attacks against independent media outlets in Hungary. While it is difficult to find which individuals or organisations ordered these attacks, researchers at Qurium were able to pinpoint a number of US and Europe-based companies specialised in these types of services.

In Germany, six newspapers part of the Rheinische Post Mediengruppe were targeted by another type of cyber-attack called "supply chain attack". It consists of using third-party elements that have access to the organisation's data to infiltrate it and damage it. In this case, the IT service provider Circ. IT GmbH & Co. KG, which is responsible for the media group's IT infrastructure, was attacked, preventing the newspapers' websites from operating normally for a while.

In France, satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo had some data stolen and offered for sale for 20 bitcoins on online forums. A group of hackers allegedly from Iran, calling themselves "Holy Soul", claimed the attack and said they had access to the names and contact details, including email and postal addresses, of over 200,000 subscribers. Two Twitter accounts impersonating Charlie Hebdo's staff were also created to post the leaked data. The hacking came after the media published a series of cartoons on Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei.

Digital attacks such as DDoS and hacking are becoming increasingly common in many sectors, including the media. The numerous alerts from Ukraine confirm that the Russian invasion has amplified this phenomenon, which is being used as a propaganda weapon. Although in Hungary and the rest of Europe it is not always possible to draw conclusions as to the motives behind the attacks, this trend is nevertheless concerning and requires media organisations to dedicate financial resources to take preventive measures to protect their data and reputation.

Populist attacks on press freedom in Europe

Ahead of a bumper year for elections and democracy in Europe in 2024, a populist political climate continued to simmer across the continent in 2023, with mixed but overall detrimental impacts on media freedom. Since its inception, the Mapping Media Freedom platform has documented different forms of populist attacks on the press, ranging from verbal insults portraying journalists as the enemies of the people, to attempts to smother critical reporting on populist parties through legal threats or stigmatising laws. The hostile relationship of populists with independent media was on full show in Europe in 2023. Though populist parties were defeated in key elections in Poland and Spain, elsewhere parties in the Netherlands and Slovakia won major victories. In Italy, the impact of the election of the far-right coalition government of Prime Minister Georgia Meloni in late 2022 began to be felt, while in Hungary the government of Victor Orbán continued its illiberal grip on power. While the continued surge of pop-

Milorad Dodik listens to the questions of journalists at a press conference in Sarajevo, Bosnia
picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS | Armin Durgut

ulist politics did not directly translate in all countries into attacks on the media, in many EU Member States and candidate countries the friction between watchdog journalism and populist politics was clear to see.

Verbal attacks and censorship

Many of the populist attacks documented by MapMF in 2023 can be characterised as attempts by political figures and ministers to discredit watchdog reporting on matters of public interest by falsely portraying them as attacks on the party or on its supporters. In this tactic, politicians attempted to discredit the media outlet, personally attack journalists, or try to muddy the waters around the evidence presented in the story. Another element involved obstructing and censoring scrutiny from journalists or denying accreditation to ask questions. Unsurprisingly,

press conferences – where journalists can ask direct and often challenging questions to politicians – were a common location for these attacks, according to MapMF. In 2023, 48 serious cases were documented across EU Member States and candidate countries. However, the most common context for politicians to verbally attack and discredit the media in the past year was online, specifically on social media platforms. Across Europe, platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), as well as others, were used as megaphones to denigrate journalists. In 2023, 40 cases of serious verbal attacks by politicians against the media were carried out online, according to MapMF data. These alerts were added in cases in which criticism against journalists and news outlets crossed over from legitimate speech to a deliberate attempt to smear them. While these comments very rarely met the threshold for criminal sanctions, they were

derogatory and often aimed at generating the maximum hostility against journalists. In many cases, populist attacks by politicians against reporters on social media platforms were followed up with online harassment by trolls.

An indicative example of verbal attacks on journalists by populist politicians or parties within the EU in 2023 included the discreditation of Telex and other independent Hungarian news outlets by the head of the cabinet of Prime Minister Victor Orbán, who insinuated that Hungarian media which receive foreign funding undermined national sovereignty. More widely, the Fidesz government continued to pile pressure on the remaining independent media. 2023 saw a coordinated smear campaign aimed at stigmatising foreign funding to news outlets. This included labels of "dollar media" and accusations that media receiving foreign funding tow the line of the United States or Hungarian-born billionaire George Soros, leading to increased online harassment. In March, Prime Minister Orbán also accused what he called the "leftist" media in the country of being pro-war because they are "financed from abroad". In addition, Hungarian media outlets critical of the government were systematically denied access to press conferences.

In Poland, another country which long exhibited populist and illiberal attacks on the press, the election saw a number of attacks on major media channels. In July, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki of the then-ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party discredited broadcaster TVN during a press conference, comparing it to "communist television". In similarly problematic language, the party's

chairman, Jarosław Kaczynski, in May called a TVN24 journalist a "Kremlin representative". In November, amidst the election campaign, the PiS Minister of Culture and National Heritage again discredited a TVN24 journalist, accusing TVN of spreading "lies and manipulation". These attacks echoed long-established tactics by the ruling populist party in Poland of stigmatising independent media. Hopes for media freedom were boosted by the victory of the democratic opposition in December.

Elsewhere in the Visegrád region of Slovakia, the return of Prime Minister Robert Fico and his SMER party to government in October was accompanied by increasing verbal attacks on the press. In November, in a video published on his Facebook page, Fico called TV Markíza, Denník N, Denník SME, and Aktuality enemies and 'hostile media', claiming that they control a major opposition party. This followed similar smears against critical media during the election campaign by Fico and his allies. In November, Fico followed up on his pledge by announcing he would stop all communication with the four leading domestic news outlets and bar their journalists from receiving any responses to questions.

Elsewhere in Europe, in February an MP from the Greek left-wing populist party SYRIZA published a rant on social media denouncing the so-called deep state and called for his party to "get rid" of multiple journalists due to their editorial line. Meanwhile, in Finland, the election of the right-wing government saw a number of populist and anti-media attacks on the press by MPs. In one case in July, the far-right Finns Party secretary Arto Luukkanen discredited Finnish media and

journalists in a blog post, claiming that they are part of a "leftist operation" attempting to invalidate the 2023 parliamentary election results, comparing Finnish journalism to North Korea.

Amongst EU candidate countries, the worst political offender in 2023 was Milorad Dodik, the president of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In November, Dodik launched a tirade against N1 journalist Snežana Mitrović. After being asked a question at a press conference, Dodik reacted aggressively and accused her television station N1 of lying, pursuing an "anti-Serbian narrative", and actively seeking to "destroy" Republika Srpska. After the event, Mitrović received a personal phone call from Dodik in which he shouted at her again and insulted her using curse words. Earlier in the year, Dodik falsely accused journalists in the entity of possibly orchestrating attacks on their own property. In Albania meanwhile, in October the former Prime Minister, Sali Berisha, verbally attacked the BIRN Albania media outlet for "slander" during a press conference in response to questions.

Legal attacks and 'foreign agent' laws

One of the innovative tactics used by populist politicians in Europe in recent years has been to portray critical or independent media who receive any form of foreign funding or grants from abroad as being hostile to national sovereignty. In many countries with captured media landscapes, foreign grants have been a lifeline for some professional independent media, who have been deliberately drained of other forms of funding within their countries, such as state advertising. In 2023, worrying developments were seen in two countries regarding either foreign agent laws or similar sovereignty protection legislation, one in a candidate country and another one in an EU Member State: Bosnia and Herzegovina and Hungary.

In December, the Hungarian government passed the controversial Sovereignty Protection Act after just two weeks of debate, without proper public consultation. The law established a new office headed by an individual appointed directly by the Prime Minister and its main task is to map and report on perceived threats to Hungary's national sovereignty and identify bodies or individuals suspected of serving malign foreign interests. While media were not named directly within the text, the intentionally vague language and broad scope for application of the law effectively opened the door to state-sponsored pressure on those media which receive foreign funding and produce journalism critical of the government. In BiH meanwhile, the Dodik government in Republika Srpska adopted in first reading the so-called "foreign agents" law, formally known as the Special Register and Publicity of the Work of Non-profit Organisations Law. Using language similar to Russia's foreign agent law, the legislation regulates the function and activities of NGOs who receive foreign funding and subjects them to special registration and periodic reporting requirements. The damaging draft law, which had not passed by the end of the year, affects many non-profit media which are registered as NGOs.

Elsewhere, in Italy the new coalition government led by PM Georgia Meloni and her far-right Brothers of Italy party also began dialling up the pressure on the media in a number of populist attacks. Unlike in other countries, these took the form of legal threats and lawsuits, often by leading politicians. In December, Claudio Durigon, the Undersecretary of Labour and member of right-wing party Lega, threatened legal action against a newspaper for the third time within a year, accusing Domani of defamation. In December, Minister of Culture Gennaro Sangiuliano sent a letter of formal notice through his lawyers to RAI Radio1 program Un giorno da pecora, threatening legal action and compensation for damages due to the programme making fun of the minister in July 2023. In October, the Undersecretary of Culture Vittorio Sgarbi publicly discredited and threatened legal action against Il Fatto Quotidiano journalist Thomas Mackinson, accusing him of "threats, extortion" and of orchestrating a "campaign with ulterior motives" in response to a report.

Overall, 2023 offered continued warnings about the damaging effect populist politics can have on media freedom and the safety of journalists, particularly online. These attempts to discredit the press, and the different tactics and language used to do so, could offer a blueprint for other populist attacks on media in 2024, a year in which several major elections in numerous EU Member States and European Parliament elections will be held.

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)

In 2023, the MFRR documented 20 legal cases containing hallmarks of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) in 11 countries of the European Union. This included both civil and criminal lawsuits. However, this figure is far from reflecting the whole scale of the phenomenon in all Member States. It should be pointed out that SLAPPs are difficult to document for a number of reasons: the complexity of legal cases, the absence of universal definition, the language barrier when analysing legal documents, and the shame and fear still present among journalists of making their case public. Despite its complexity, the issue of SLAPPs has been recognised by the European Union and the Council of Europe as a serious threat to media freedom and free expression in Europe. Two major legislative instruments emanating from these two institutions are about to be introduced in 2024 and will no doubt provide the groundwork for a common understanding of their characteristics.

According to the Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE), SLAPPs are "abusive lawsuits filed by a private party with the purpose of silencing critical speech". By initiating malicious legal proceedings, powerful or wealthy individuals abuse the law to silence legitimate public interest journalism and drain media and journalists' financial resources and time. SLAPPs generally follow

public interest investigations and are used as an act of retaliation, or as a signal sent to the journalistic community, rather than an attempt to seek redress and ultimately win the case. Litigants usually do not request to amend or correct facts, or use their right of reply. According to MFRR data, in 2023 in the EU, SLAPP cases were filed by corporations in eight cases, by public officials in five cases, by private individuals in four cases, and several other cases were filed by political parties, the judiciary, and other media.

In France, five SLAPP cases were recorded. One of the biggest cases involved a daily investigative reporting on politics, business, and media, La Lettre, against the French mass-market retail group Casino. Casino accused the media of defamation for nine articles published between 27 April and 14 June. The company seeks damages of €13.7 million for "a fall in the value of the share" triggered by La Lettre's articles about the group's poor financial situation and the on-going negotiations about a change of shareholders. Casino also sued for defamation BFM Business, a French radio and television channel focusing on business and economic matters. The other four cases involved the local investigative outlet Mediacités, which has been very vocal and transparent about its numerous legal attacks. The media outlet was sued three times for defamation by the property developer Alila and its CEO between March and November 2023. In the two first proceedings, for which damages requested were particularly high, the Lyon judicial court recognised the seriousness of

the investigations carried out by Mediacités, as well as their public interest and acquitted Mediacités on the grounds of good faith. The court ordered Alila and its CEO to pay damages of 5,000 euros for abuse of process and 5,000 euros to reimburse the legal costs. Alila appealed, and its CEO started a third procedure related to an article about a tax adjustment concerning him, considering that his honour was "undermined" and that he was presented as "a fraudster". The hearing will take place in March 2024. In a separate case, a French MP was condemned for "filing an abusive civil action" against the journalist and co-founder of Mediacités, Jacques Trentesaux.

Italy was another country of concern, where defamation is criminalised and widely used as a weapon to silence critical voices. Map-MF documented four SLAPPs for defamation, both civil (2) and criminal (2). The most prominent case involved Prime Minister Georgia Meloni against journalist and writer Roberto Saviano, who was convicted for "aggravated defamation" and made to pay a €1,000 fine for criticising Meloni's anti-migrant stance on television. Saviano's conviction was considered as a serious blow to free expression by 12 international media freedom and journalists' organisations.

Other public officials filing lawsuits with elements of SLAPPs involved Members of Parliament and mayors. In Ireland, the Irish Times and its correspondent Harry McGee were both sued for defamation by Sinn Féin TD Chris Andrews. In Hungary, the Mayor of

Nyírmártonfalva filed a defamation lawsuit against independent news outlet Átlátszó, its publisher, and its editors for their reporting on an alleged misuse of EU grant money. In a final decision, the judge ruled to dismiss all the defamation claims. In Spain, the Mayor of Marbella, whose wealth is estimated around €12 millions, filed a defamation lawsuit against Spanish online media outlet El Diario and three of its journalists, claiming damages of €50,000. The lawsuit followed three investigations: on the prosecution of the mayor's husband and stepson in a case against international drug trafficking, into the mayor's financial assets, and a complaint before the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office.

In Bulgaria, insurance company Lev Ins took legal action against Mediapool for €500,000, in what may be the highest ever compensation demanded from a media outlet in the country. The civil lawsuit was filed in relation to an article about Bulgaria threatening to be excluded from the 'Green Card' system (an international certificate of insurance for motorists abroad), referring to transcripts of a meeting of the government and quoting the then caretaker Minister of Finance about the track record of Lev Ins on the matter. In its lawsuit, the company said that it "felt affected" by the media report and claimed it had suffered reputational damage. Lev Ins was offered a right of reply and questions were sent to the director by email, to which the company responded "you will get an answer to your biassed questions in court". The court eventually dismissed the case.

SLAPP strategies also consist of suing the other party in a different country in order to make the defence even more costly, time-consuming, and disrupting. Only one such case was recorded by the MFRR in 2023: the Finnish public broadcaster Yle, based in Finland, was sued over an article published in Finland about the Helsinki shipyard that has become the property of a Russian oligarch. The oligarch started a defamation lawsuit in Monaco, where he has a home, requesting €100,000 in compensation for damages. Known as "forum shopping", this practice consists of taking legal action not in the most logical place, but in a place where legal costs are higher and legal practices different (in this case, a non-EU country), further accentuating the intimidating nature of the SLAPPs. As a result, Yle faced time pressure in responding to the lawsuit as all the legal materials had to be translated into French. In the end, the Monaco court found that it had no jurisdiction to rule on the case and dismissed all charges and civil actions.

As shown by the Yle example, journalists and media outlets based outside the European Union are also subjected to SLAPPs. At least two other cases were monitored in the Western Balkans. In North Macedonia, Investigative Reporting Lab (IRL) and its editor-in-chief were sued for slander and insult by the former Deputy Prime Minister, who is also a businessman. IRL had published an investigative documentary about the imports of oil in the country. A court first ruled in favour of IRL, before overturning the

verdict. IRL was ordered to pay a symbolic €1 in damages, plus thousands of euros for legal costs. In addition, the judge inexplicably ruled that IRL should be classified as "non-media" and that its staff were "members of a group", rather than professional journalists, suggesting that the platform was operating illegally. He recommended that the Ministry of Justice examine the operations of the media outlet. It should be noted that the lawsuit comes against a backdrop of years-long attempts to pressure, discredit, and verbally attack the media outlet and its staff.

These most emblematic cases clearly show the necessity for policymakers and the judiciary to better understand the phenomenon of SLAPPs, their characteristics as distinct from legitimate lawsuits, their intimidating nature, and the serious damages that such proceedings can inflict on media organisations – sometimes threatening their very existence and disrupting their daily operations.

Country Reports

European Union

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France

Alerts: **110**
Attacked*: **134**

In France, 110 incidents were documented, impacting the work of 136 media workers or organisations. With 39 alerts, physical assaults were again frequent, mostly reported in the public space and mainly related to the protests against the pension reform, and the riots in reaction to the death of 16-year-old Nahel, shot by a police officer in Nanterre. Other attacks during protests ranged from intimidation, damage to professional equipment, to fines and arrests. Overall, private individuals (40) and the police (37) were by far the main sources of attacks.

Among the 27 legal incidents recorded in 2023, the case of Ariane Lavrilleux was seen as a symbol of a general decline in press freedom in France. The journalist, working for the investigative NGO media outlet Disclose, was taken into custody for 39 hours while her home was being searched. The interrogation took place "as part of an investigation into the compromise of national defence secrets and the revelation of information that could lead to the identification of a protected agent, opened in July 2022". Under surveillance by the secret services for some time, Lavrilleux was questioned for her work on French arms sales abroad published as part of the "Egypt Papers".

Another worrying case of interrogation and surveillance targeted the photojournalist Yoan Jäger-Sthul, who works on social and environmental topics. After a 55-hour custody and a police search at his home following the coverage of an activists' action carried out by the French political ecology and protest movement "Soulèvements de la terre", Yoan Jäger-Sthul was charged with "degradation, destruction in an organised gang", and "criminal conspiracy". He then learned that he had been under surveillance by the French anti-terrorism unit for at least six months. Other legal incidents included four civil lawsuits and six defamation cases (see thematic report on SLAPPs).

Additionally, more media freedom violations linked to coverage of environmental issues occurred in France targeting seven journalists who were forced to delete footage while filming near a nuclear power plant, arrested, or injured during an environmental protest.

Journalist Martin Boudot, who produces documentaries on environmental crimes was granted police surveillance following death threats over the phone. Such verbal attacks (31 cases) against journalists remained frequent, in particular intimidation and threatening (22). Prominent TV journalist Ruth Elrief was also granted police

protection by France's Interior Minister. He declared that he considered that a far-left politician "had put a target on her back" by posting a tweet on X accusing her of "despising muslims". The tweet triggered a hate campaign against the journalist.

The Netherlands

Alerts: **15**
Attacked: **18**

In the Netherlands, since the tragic murder of journalist Peter R. de Vries in 2021, the state and government have made great efforts to promote media freedom and pluralism. Despite the legal framework put in place, the MFRR recorded 15 incidents in total. Half of the cases recorded in 2023 were verbal attacks (8 alerts), 6 of them were intimidation and threatening from private individuals.

In June, a journalist received several phone calls after an article he had written on fairground ride operators was published: "If you make it impossible for me to work, I will make it impossible for you to work," the caller told the journalist. Another striking example was the case of a journalist from NH News, who, in March, reported that she had been threatened by an ex-TBS prisoner guilty of murder. In October, a man carrying weapons told a security guard of Hilversum's

Media Park that he was there to kill journalist Tim Hoffman. The man was arrested and charged. A hearing took place at the end of the year 2023, and the case will continue to be heard in 2024.

Despite pledges for the protection of media freedom, the Public Prosecution Office wiretapped journalists from De Correspondent during a conversation with lobbyist Sywert van Lienden and his business partners Bernd Damme and Camille van Gestel: an action in disagreement with the 2018 law on the protection of journalists against the use of eavesdropping equipment. This is one of the four legal cases that happened in 2023 in the country.

The independent and public broadcaster NOS was targeted once again by COVID-19 deniers, who in a collective action covered the headquarter's building with thousands of post-it notes questioning the role of the agency in excess Covid deaths.

Italy

Alerts: **80**
Attacked: **109**

In 2023, Italy experienced an alarming number of press freedom violations amidst the election of a new hard-right government. Out of 80 documented cases involving 109

individuals or media entities, 33.8% were verbal attacks and 32.5% involved vexatious lawsuits or legal threats against journalists and news outlets.

The increase in incidents largely coincided with the rise of the coalition government led

by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni in October 2022. Under this administration, verbal attacks, censorship attempts, and legal proceedings by politicians against media professionals became notably more frequent. Threats to the editorial independence of public broadcaster RAI drew concerns, as two far-right executives were appointed to leading roles and the government announced plans to reduce the public broadcaster's licence fee.

Private individuals were the primary sources of violations rather than political figures, constituting over a third (37.5%) of the recorded cases. A concerning trend in Italy was the rise of physical attacks by private individuals against media professionals covering public events and demonstrations.

MapMF documented two cases of arson during this period. In April, Italian journalist Rossella Puccio's family car was set ablaze by an unidentified man, while in May, Ettore Paris, director of the monthly magazine Questotrentino, had his car burned in a suspected arson attack. The magazine had recently published investigative articles on a trial involving alleged members of the mafia. Additionally, the editorial office of Adnkronos news agency was raided and the editor-in-chief's car was broken into, the editorial office of Giornale di Vicenza was vandalised, and a man tried to break into the editorial office of Il Clandestino.

Italy saw a notable increase in documented legal threats against journalists and media in 2023. Nearly a third (32.5%) of documented violations in Italy were legal incidents,

and most of them were related to defamation lawsuits. Defamation remains a criminal offence under the Italian Penal Code, with "defamation through the press" being an aggravated offence (Article 596 of the Penal Code). The MFRR documented multiple vexatious defamation lawsuits or threats of legal action against journalists and news outlets, initiated by government officials, ministers, authorities, companies, and private individuals. In October, writer and journalist Roberto Saviano was convicted of criminal defamation in a case brought by current Italian PM Giorgia Meloni.

The Senate Justice Committee's proposed amendments to the defamation law, known as the 'Balboni bill,' stirred widespread concern and criticism. Despite eliminating prison sentences for journalists, as urged by the Constitutional Court and international bodies, the amendments introduce new challenges. Notably, the bill included fines of up to €50,000, mandatory rectifications without editorial comments, and the potential for 'forum shopping,' requiring journalists and lawyers to incur significant expenses by moving the competent court to the plaintiff's city. Additionally, the bill didn't introduce measures against baseless complaints targeting journalists and media. In December, the Chamber of Deputies passed an amendment preventing the publication of pre-trial detention orders until the conclusion of preliminary investigations, hindering journalists from reporting on arrests and on law enforcement and judicial actions.

Verbal attacks against journalists and news outlets, both online and in person, were

prevalent and included three cases of death threats. Freelance journalist Ciro Pisano received an anonymous death threat in his mailbox, the editorial team of Casteddu On-line news portal received death threats via phone call, and the director of Tirreno newspaper received a letter containing a bullet.

Hungary

Alerts: **49**
Attacked: **93**

Press freedom and media pluralism in Hungary remained in crisis, as Mapping Media Freedom documented 49 press freedom violations involving 93 individuals or media entities. These incidents, however, only assessed some elements of the systemic issues in Hungary's media landscape, which is characterised by high levels of media capture and weak media pluralism. A significant new threat emerged during this period, marked by Distributed Denial-of-Service (DDoS) cyberattacks targeting numerous media outlets.

Over one third (38.8%) of the recorded violations were attacks on media infrastructure and property, in this case server and website systems, with the MFRR documenting 17 waves of DDoS attacks against over 40 Hungarian media outlets (see chapter 'Hacking and DDoS attacks'). Beginning in April, these large-scale cyber attacks paralysed websites for hours, causing financial losses for media companies and hindering access to content. Notably, leading online independent media critical of the government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán were the primary targets.

While the specific motive of these attacks remained unconfirmed and no one was held accountable, coded messages in Hungarian during the attacks suggested domestic coordination rather than foreign involvement. The scale and duration of the attacks, spanning several months, indicated considerable resources by those responsible.

Media1, a Hungarian news platform covering media-related topics, faced multiple powerful DDoS attacks. Perpetrators, leaving behind threats and insults in server logs, targeted Media1's editor-in-chief, Dániel Szalay. Despite some media filing police reports, investigations yielded little progress, given the challenges of identifying DDoS attackers, who often remain anonymous.

Verbal attacks included multiple smear campaigns by pro-government media and politicians. Critical independent media faced pressure and smears related to funding, with successive Fidesz governments systematically draining state advertising funding, forcing some outlets to seek foreign project grants to survive while maintaining editorial independence. In February, a Mércé reporter received threatening calls with death threats after covering the Day of Honour counter-demonstration in Budapest.

On 12 December, the parliament passed the Sovereignty Protection Act by the Orbán government in Hungary without proper public consultation (see chapter 'Populist attacks on press freedom in Europe'). Although media were not directly named within the text, press freedom groups warned that the intentionally vague language and broad scope for application of the law would be used by the state to harass and pressure independent, foreign funded media critical of the government.

Spain

Alerts: **52**
Attacked: **79**

Amidst the July 2023 parliamentary elections in Spain, public authorities, including right-wing VOX, People's Party (PP), Democracia Ourensana (DO), and left-wing Podemos, targeted media and journalists in different ways over their reporting. Instances included prohibiting certain news outlets from covering events and refusing questions from independent media outlets during press conferences, underscoring deepening political polarisation in Spain.

Despite winning July's election, PP was unable to form a government with the support of Vox and other smaller parties. The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) regained power by agreeing to a controversial amnesty for Catalan separatists, which led to major protests across the country. Journalists and media workers covering the demonstrations were repeatedly obstructed, harassed and attacked, mainly by protesters.

Independent journalists and news outlets were repeatedly denied access or accreditation to events, highlighting ongoing challenges in accessing information. In November, the Hungarian government banned underage people from visiting the 2023 World Press Photo event in Budapest, denying them the opportunity to see the world's leading photojournalism exhibition. The Fidesz government claimed that some of the event's photos violated a contentious law restricting LGBTQ+ content to minors.

Verbal attacks constituted nearly half (48.1%) of the 52 recorded press freedom violations on Mapping Media Freedom, with particularly alarming gender-based attacks against women journalists. Sports journalist María Tikas faced a wave of sexist insults on Twitter, and GolTV sports journalist María Morán received serious rape and death threats on social media. Journalist Isabel Balado was sexually assaulted, when a man groped her while she was reporting live on air, and Telecinco journalist Ángela Julve was sexually harassed verbally by two men as she was speaking on a live broadcast.

A worrying case of serious physical violence occurred in July, when a man broke into the offices of La Voz de Galicia and stabbed journalist Alfredo López Penide with a knife, severely injuring him. The perpetrator, who stormed the newsroom due to the publication of a recent story that revealed his previous conviction for another assault, also destroyed furniture and computers, and threatened another staff member.

Spanish news outlets faced [legal threats](#) such as vexatious lawsuits, including [a defamation case](#) by the Mayor of Marbella against online media outlet El Diario and three journalists. Satirical magazine Mongolia [faced two lawsuits](#) by Christian groups for "offending religious sentiments," a charge under article 525 of the Spanish criminal code, which press freedom and freedom of expression advocates in Spain have long called to be repealed. In addition, a journalist of the Huelva Información newspaper [was sentenced](#) to two years in prison for revealing secret information from a judicial summary. The sentence was understood to be the first time in Spanish history that a journalist had been sentenced to prison time for the crime of revealing secrets from the leaked report of a judicial investigation. Critics of the decision said the journalist had been made an example of and had likely been reporting on the orders of

editors. They noted that reporting on leaks from judicial files after high-profile criminal cases was commonplace in Spain, and that the sentence was unprecedented.

MapMF recorded two cases of arbitrary detentions of journalists. In May, National Police officers [violently detained](#) El Salto photojournalist Rodrigo Mínguez for recording VOX president Santiago Abascal with his mobile phone. In November, El Mundo and El Español journalists [were arbitrarily detained](#) by police while covering a demonstration in front of the headquarters of the PSOE in Madrid.

In Galicia, Mapping Media Freedom [documented two cases](#) of employers forcing journalists to transfer departments as alleged retaliation for their reporting. In addition, several Spanish news outlets [were targeted](#) with cyberattacks.

Finland

Alerts: **29**
Attacked: **43**

Finland, despite being known as one of the leading countries in the world for press freedom, experienced multiple threats to journalists and media during 2023, with a total of 29 cases involving 43 individuals or other media entities recorded on MapMF. Especially shocking was the [landmark conviction](#) of two Helsingin Sanomat (HS) journalists in the infamous state secrets case, which set a dangerous precedent for reporting on national security issues.

Following a lengthy and precarious investigation and trial, HS journalists Tuomo Pietiläinen and Laura Halminen were convicted of disclosing state secrets, even though the Helsinki District Court found no evidence that concrete harm or danger was caused to the interests of national defence or state security, and agreed that the story related to new intelligence legislation was of public interest. In December, the Supreme Administrative Court of Finland (KHO) ruled that Pietiläinen [had to pay](#) a hefty amount of taxes for the legal aid the newspaper provided for him in relation to the case.

Finnish journalists also faced other legal threats. In April, Russian oligarch Vladimir Kasyanenko [filed a defamation lawsuit](#) against one of the editors-in-chief of the Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yle) with a court in Monaco, demanding fines and €100,000 in damages due to Yle's reporting on his business ventures. In October, a HS journalist and editor-in-chief [were charged](#) with aggravated defamation and aggravated dissemination of information violating private life in relation to an investigative report about the alleged misconduct of a police officer. Defamation remains a criminal offence in Finland.

The work of journalists [was obstructed](#) several times during demonstrations and other events. In February, police [briefly detained](#) freelance photojournalist Miro Johansson and confiscated his memory card while he was covering a protest in front of the Turkish embassy in Helsinki. On multiple occasions, journalists and news outlets also [struggled with inquiries](#) under the Freedom of Information Act.

As the right-wing government led by the National Coalition Party (Kokoomus) took office, verbal attacks, threats of legal action and harassment campaigns [by politicians](#) became frequent. Especially alarming was the large-scale [smear campaign](#) launched by right-wing politicians against Iltalehti journalist Ida Erämaa, which lead to threats of physical and sexual violence from social media users. MapMF recorded one case of physical violence against journalists, when a reporter of newspaper Karjalainen [was attacked](#) on assignment.

News outlets faced threats of [commercial interference](#) in retaliation to their reporting, which has a chilling effect on independent journalism and endangers the public's right to information. The threat of cutting off advertising revenue is a strong way to pressure local newspapers, as advertisements are often a significant part of their funding.

In February, chairman of the Orimattila City Council and member of the right-wing Finns Party (PS) Ville Erola [threatened to withdraw](#) the city's advertisements from local newspaper Orimattilan Sanomat. Erola claimed that the newspaper and one of its journalists had repeatedly written defamatory and false news about "members of a certain party" and that despite warnings, the "despicable reporter" continued to "defame the establishment who pays them". In June, shipping company Viking Line [cancelled its advertisements](#) in the Mariehamn-based Nya Åland after the newspaper published two critical articles about the company. In addition, the Finnish Transport and Communications Minister and PS member Lulu Ranne stated that [cuts to the funding](#) of Yle are necessary, accusing the public broadcaster of politically biassed reporting.

Slovakia

Alerts: **18**
Attacked: **30**

As left-wing party Smer, led by populist Prime Minister Robert Fico, won the September elections, attacks on independent media and journalists intensified immediately, following a year marked by few threats to media freedom. During the monitoring period, MapMF recorded a total of 18 press freedom violations involving 30 individuals or other media entities, with the overwhelming majority stemming from the new coalition government.

Verbal attacks were the most common type of threat to Slovak journalists and media. Fico, the Smer party, and other politicians continued a trend of publicly discrediting independent journalists and news outlets. In November, Fico announced that there would be an assessment of the accreditation of certain media to the government and cabinet offices, describing the media as hostile to his party and "enemies" of the people. Fico later announced he would stop all communication with four leading domestic news outlets, in an escalation of policy by the populist leader of blocking questions from some critical media.

In December, the newly appointed Slovak government approved a plan to cut the funding of the public broadcaster RTVS by 30% and to divide the media into two separate entities. Media freedom groups warned the slashing of the budget would weaken the economic sustainability of RTVS and represented a risk for the public media's independence.

In addition, journalists received serious threats of violence online. Martin Daňo, a blogger and provocateur known for spreading disinformation, published several offensive videos on social media about Monika Tódová, renowned Slovak journalist of daily newspaper Denník N. Daňo stalked, filmed, and harassed Tódová during her stay in the Slovak mountains. Daňo's videos triggered a whirlwind of hateful, homophobic, and threatening reactions from other online provocateurs and disinformation websites, as well as politicians including Fico. Two days before the country's general election in September, a deepfake audio clip appeared online which involved a fake conversation between Tódová and a leading politician, in which voices altered to impersonate the pair discussed how to rig the vote. The fake audio clip, which was created and disseminated by an unknown source, was aimed at manipulating voters, as well as discrediting the journalist and politician. In June, far-right conspiracist Danny Kollár launched an online harassment campaign against Aktuality reporter Matej Príbelský.

In March, the Smer filed three criminal defamation lawsuits against well-known journalists and political commentators Marián Lešek, Michal Havran Jr, and Tomáš Hudák. The criminal charges were initiated on behalf of the party by activists and officials and were filed with the Prosecutor General's Office. The three lawsuits stemmed from separate commentary and opinion pieces the journalists had written for leading independent daily news outlets, Denník N and Denník Sme, between 8 and 14 February 2023.
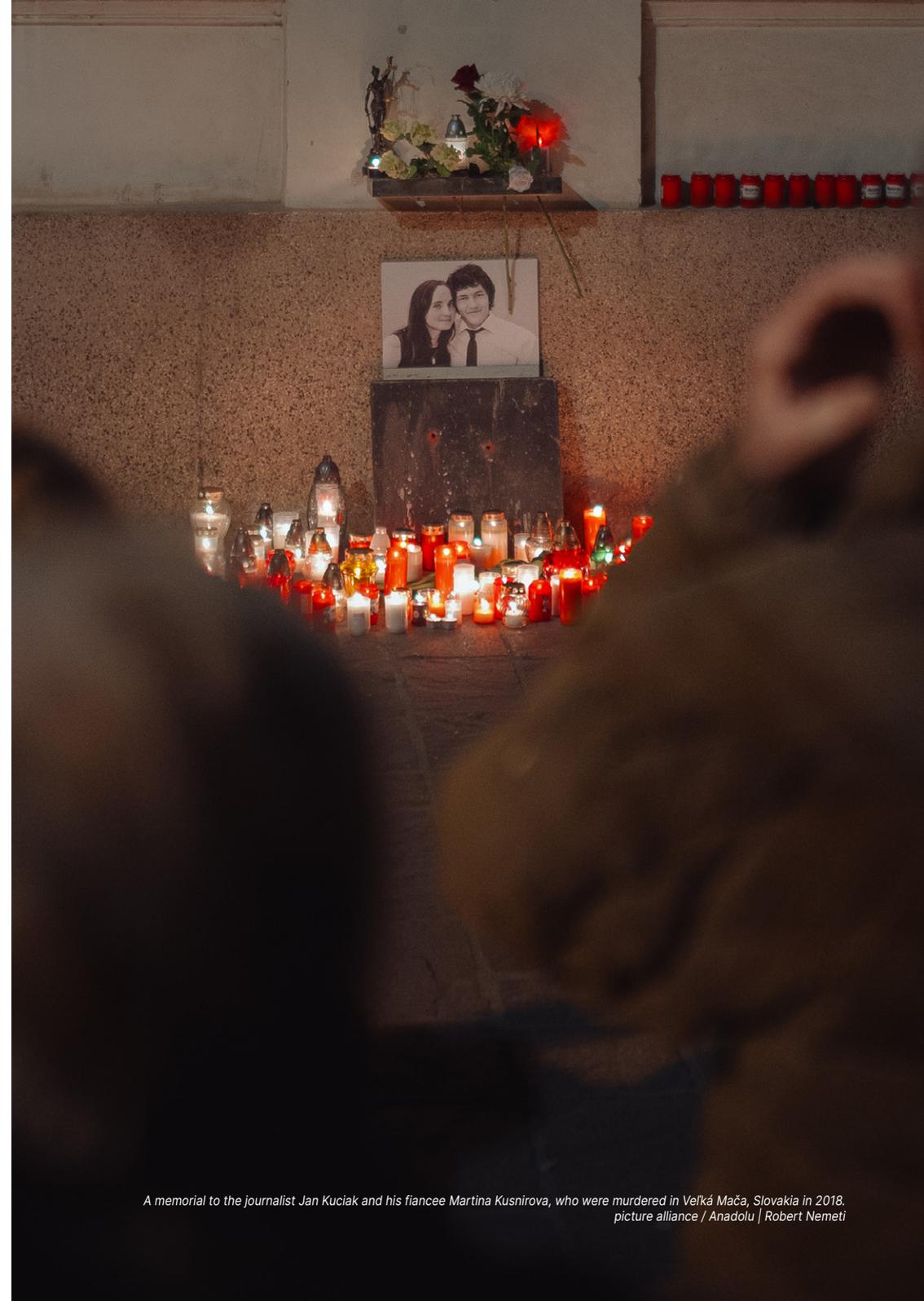
A memorial to the journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancee Martina Kusnirova, who were murdered in Veľká Mača, Slovakia in 2018.
picture alliance / Anadolu | Robert Nemeti

Candidate countries

Serbia

Alerts: **48**
Attacked: **64**

The MFRR recorded 48 alerts involving 64 persons and entities related to the media, but these alone do not capture the systemic challenges faced by the press in Serbia. In 2023, amendments to the Law on Public Information and Media and the Law on Electronic Media further restricting media freedom were passed in Parliament.

Intimidation and threats made up the majority of recorded incidents. Additionally, there was a continuous trend of politicians discrediting media outlets and journalists throughout the year.

The period saw a high number of attacks perpetrated by private individuals (25). Nenad Kulačin, host of the podcast "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly", was insulted on Facebook and later harassed and received death threats via messages sent on different social media platforms. Seven attacks performed by private individuals involved physical violence, including one in

which a man tried to stab a cameraman from TV Prva.

Access to information remained a concern. In October, a team of N1 journalists was refused entry to the first session of the temporary governing body of the city of Belgrade which, according to the law, must be open to the public. In July, journalists were asked to stay in a locked room during an event they had been invited to. The Serbian authorities refused them the right to follow and report on a speech given by Prime Minister Ana Brnabic.

The MFRR documented three civil lawsuits. KRIK, a Serbian investigative media outlet, was again sued for "mental suffering" by Nikola Petrović, President Vučić's "best man". According to him, information published about the collaboration between a businessman close to the president and a known criminal involved in drug trafficking were incorrect. Over the past two years, KRIK has faced a total of 12 lawsuits, including three filed by Petrović.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Alerts: **26**
Attacked: **35**

With 26 alerts published on MapMF in 2023, Bosnia-Herzegovina took a step backwards in terms of media freedom. The granting of candidate status for EU membership in December 2022 coincided with increasing legislative and political pressure on journal-

ists and media outlets in the country. Verbal attacks (9 alerts), legal incidents (8), threats to property such as cars (5), censorship (2), and physical assaults (2) were documented against 35 persons or entities related to media.

The situation was particularly alarming in Republika Srpska (RS), Bosnia's Serb entity,

where President Milorad Dodik is creating a suffocating legal environment for the exercise of journalism and is using hostile rhetoric to denigrate journalists and stigmatise critical reporting. Half of the alerts (13) were recorded in this part of the country.

Three journalists were interrogated by the police in relation to an article written by crime reporter Nikola Morača. N1 journalist Snežana Mitrović was insulted over the phone by Milorad Dodik himself, the day after he accused her during a press conference of using "anti-Serbian narrative" and insinuated that "a special service" was following "everything" she or N1 were doing.

A severe assault on four journalists by a group of hooligans in Banja Luka (RS) took place after police banned a planned LGBTQ event there, citing security concerns. A group of 20 to 30 people, equipped with

metal bats and glass bottles, physically attacked and injured the journalists, who had to be evacuated.

During an MFRR mission organised in October 2023, the delegation examined an alarming package of laws in Republika Srpska, consisting of re-criminalisation of defamation, a draft law on an NGO registry modelled on 'foreign agents' legislation, and a pending proposal of a new media law.

The legal framework is problematic in the rest of the Federation as well. At the level of Sarajevo Canton, a new draft law 'on Public Order and Peace' envisaging penalisation of 'fake news' was introduced. While at the state level, a recently adopted law on freedom of access to information established a regulatory regime which provides for a number of exceptions to the disclosure of information on matters of public interest.

Albania

Alerts: **23**
Attacked: **45**

In 2023, the MFRR recorded 23 violations of media freedom in Albania involving 45 journalists and media entities. Albania continues to create a difficult environment for independent journalism as structural issues related to the concentration of media ownership, funding and independence of the media persist. Laws are often inefficient in providing help to media workers, and the justice system is slow. Little to no investigations are carried out when needed. Censorship was still a worrying trend in 2023. For

example, three media outlets were arbitrarily denied access to events: Nyje, KLAN TV, and Citizens Channel. The journalist from Nvje, on assignment to cover a Municipal Council meeting, was denied entry, because the mayor "[felt] like it". KLAN TV, waiting outside the Parliament in Tirana to interview deputies, were forced into a designated area from which they had little chance of carrying out their work. Citizens Channel journalist Arboja Cibuku and her team were denied access to a council meeting.

In August, the Prime Minister, Edi Rama, accused journalists of not respecting the eth-

ics of their profession, in an attempt to not reply to questions on a topic that did not go in his favour.

The MFRR's monitoring work also revealed that Albania was the scene of physical (5) and verbal attacks (10). One case, at the beginning of the year, sadly resulted in the death of a 60-year-old man working in the security team of the commercial national television Top Channel. The perpetrator was found and arrested a few kilometres away from the scene of the crime. Still in the first half of 2023, a three-member reporting crew from Top Channel were physically attacked and threatened at gunpoint while working on a report on illegal mining near the town of Fushe Kruje. Three men, one of them masked, approached them, pointing guns at the filming crew from metres away. The journalists escaped unharmed. No arrest was officially made. The president of Albania, Bajram Begaj, and the Audiovisual Media Authority only denounced and condemned the attack.

As cases of DDoS attacks rose in Europe, Albania was not spared: two attacks happened in October 2023. Neither attack was claimed. Beside these two DDoS attacks, MapMF recorded four further attacks happening online, including three verbal attacks and one violation of anonymity.

Turkey

Alerts: **236**
Attacked: **320**

In the wake of the February earthquakes and leading up to the May presidential and parliamentary elections, Turkey witnessed extensive pressure on press freedom and independent media. During the monitoring period, the MFRR identified 236 cases of press and media freedom violations, involving 320 individuals or media entities.

Legal incidents emerged as the predominant threat, constituting over half (51.3%) of recorded cases. The Turkish government and authorities continued to deploy house raids, arbitrary detentions and arrests, criminal charges, and convictions to suppress journalists and stifle critical reporting. Journalists faced charges such as terrorism, insulting public officials, insulting the president, publicly disseminating misleading information, and inciting hatred.

Turkey, a major incarcerator of journalists globally, imprisoned 13 journalists, at the time of publishing. Notably, reporter Sinan Aygül became the first journalist sentenced under the new "disinformation law" enacted in late 2022. The Constitutional Court upheld the law despite major criticism.

The aftermath of the earthquakes saw the detention of journalists reporting in disaster areas, with some arrested under the disinformation law for criticising the government's response. Coordinated dawn raids in April resulted in the arrest of ten Kurdish journalists, part of a broader crackdown before the elections. Journalists, including foreign reporters, also encountered obstacles entering or leaving Turkey.

Many reporters were subjected to physical violence by police, private individuals, as well as public officials and their security guards, particularly while covering elections, demonstrations, and earthquake-affected regions. In November, journalist Yaman Kaya, the editor-in-chief of newspaper Başka Gazete, was shot at close range while driving his car. Kaya, known for his reports on corruption and environmental crimes in Bursa, survived the armed assault without injuries.

Especially in the aftermath of the earthquakes and during the elections, journalists faced verbal harassment and threats from private individuals, but also from public authorities and regulatory entities, both online and in person. Politicians and pro-government media repeatedly discredited and intimidated independent outlets and journalists. Journalists such as Murat Ağırel and Murat Bay received death threats online due to their work, and many reporters, including Yağmur Kaya, Ferit Demir, Tele1 crew as well as Fırat Akay and Selim Turan faced serious threats of violence while on assignment.

Government-controlled media regulator RTÜK continued discriminatory sanctions against critical reporting, imposing fines and temporary bans, and Turkish courts issued access-blocking orders on numerous news articles and social media posts. The Ministry of Industry and Technology did not renew the operating licence of German broadcaster Deutsche Welle's Turkish service, forcing its journalists to work as freelancers without stable contracts or social security benefits.

Following the earthquakes, reporters were repeatedly obstructed from carrying out their work in the disaster areas, most often by the police, but also by private individuals and public authorities. Turkish authorities arbitrarily denied journalists' accreditation to the earthquake areas, and later on, multiple reporters were prevented from covering the voting processes in different cities. After the earthquakes, the government temporarily blocked access to Twitter. Ahead of the national elections, X announced that, in compliance with legal requests from Turkey, the platform would limit access to certain content within the country.

Conclusion

The current monitoring report has analysed media freedom violations in European Union Member States and in candidate countries in 2023. Overall, the MFRR partners recorded 1,117 alerts involving 1,620 journalists or media workers.

The report has dedicated its four thematic chapters to some of the most prominent threats faced by journalists in the continent such as hacking attacks, SLAPPs, and discrediting and threats by public authorities. Additionally, the report also zoomed in on the situation in Ukraine after almost two years of ongoing war.

It is to be expected that the continuation of the war in Ukraine and its consequences, as well as the topics highlighted in the report, will keep affecting the state of media freedom in the continent in 2024. The MFRR will keep tracking incidents across the aforementioned countries which are available on Mapping Media Freedom and will also produce reports analysing the situation throughout the upcoming year.

Disclaimer

The respective alerts for this monitoring report can be viewed directly in the Alert Explorer here. This report includes all incidents from 1 January until 31 December 2023. If cases are reported and published after the publication of this report, they will still appear in the data available under the link of the Alert Explorer above as well as under the individual links provided within the report 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. In particular, legal incidents where journalists or outlets receive multiple related or similar legal threats, are currently record-

ed 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 thus more than 100%.

European Federation of Journalists

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