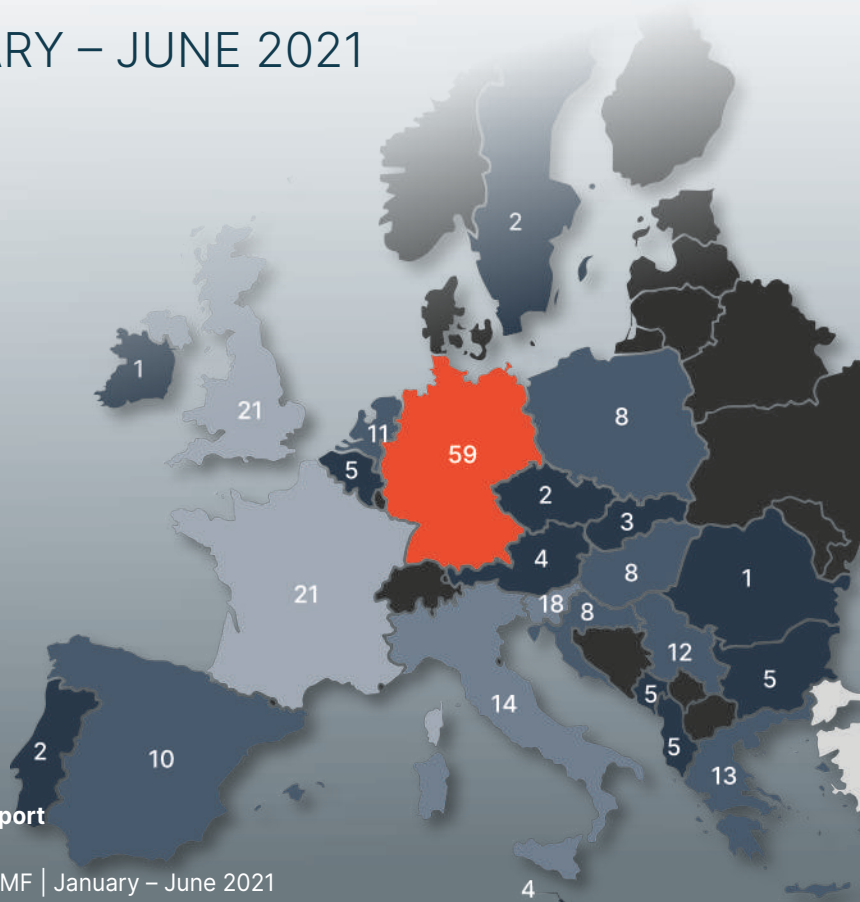




MAPPING MEDIA FREEDOM

JANUARY – JUNE 2021



Monitoring Report

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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.

www.mfrr.eu

Introduction

January 2021 marked the start to the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic. While many countries had previously signaled that strict lockdowns and emergency legislation would no longer be necessary, most European states welcomed the new year with more coronavirus cases than ever before and with severely restrictive measures.

On a positive note, in this period the first vaccines arrived in most European countries but with them also started anti-vaccine protests which have continued throughout 2021.

It also proved that the consequences of the pandemic were now affecting many areas of society, shaping political discourses, radicalising some anti-lockdown movements, and threatening press and media freedom in most countries.

The current monitoring report for the Media Freedom Rapid Response has focused on summarising press and media freedom violations across EU Member States and Candidate Countries from January 2021 until June 2021. It must be noted that this is the first time that the monitoring report covers 6 months instead of 4. While it might create a temporary data overlap, the new update on the methodology will allow for the creation of biannual reports that better reflect general trends in half year periods.

Throughout the reporting period, 272 alerts have been documented, ranging

from verbal attacks to legal incidents. 438 individuals or media entities in 26 countries have been subject to one or more press freedom violations, including the murder of veteran crime reporter Grogos Karaivaz in Greece.

26.1% of these alerts were related to Covid-19, from journalists insulted while covering anti-lockdown demonstrations to reporters receiving threats online for their coverage of vaccination programmes.

In fact, most violations of press and media freedom took place at demonstrations. Although not all of these demonstrations are linked to Covid-19, many incidents happened at anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown protests, where the press has become a target, as explained in the country analysis of Germany and the “Querdenker” movement.

The cross-country analysis also covers this topic with information from several countries. Online threats have also been on the rise in most countries, a trend that is widely explained in the thematic section of the report, which combines data on the topic from several countries and also the latest qualitative examples from Slovenia or Italy.

The most commonly recorded violation has been intimidation/threats (26.8% of the total), followed by physical assaults not resulting in injury (12.1%), Insults to

media workers are the third most common threat (10.7%), followed by discrediting, physical assault resulting in injury, and attacks to equipment.

Private individuals remain the main source or perpetrators of attacks (41.2%), followed by police or state security forces (17.6%), then government/public officials (14%).

This monitoring report uses the same format as the previous ones to analyse the topics and threats that have affected press and media freedom in the covered area in Europe. The report has been compiled by the International Press Institute (IPI) and the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), with support from the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), in the context of the joint Media Freedom Rapid Response project which monitors and supports journalists, media workers, and platforms that have been threatened.

The report includes a visual analysis of the data compiled for Mapping Media Freedom, which collects and visualises all press freedom violations in the European Union and Candidate Countries. The quantitative analysis is followed by country reports, where MFRR partners highlight some of the most relevant cases of the first 6 months of 2021 in the most affected countries. After this, a cross-regional thematic comparative analysis focuses on the rise of online threats, which have been one of the main contexts of alerts during the studied period and will continue to be monitored in the coming periods. A second comparative analysis

focuses on physical attacks against journalists. A brief conclusion closes the report.

The Media Freedom Rapid Response was launched in March 2020 to support at-risk journalists and media workers across EU Member States and Candidate Countries. Past reports can be freely accessed and downloaded on the MFRR website.

MAPPING MEDIA FREEDOM

January – June 2021

188



PHYSICAL &
PSYCHOLOGICAL
THREAT

60

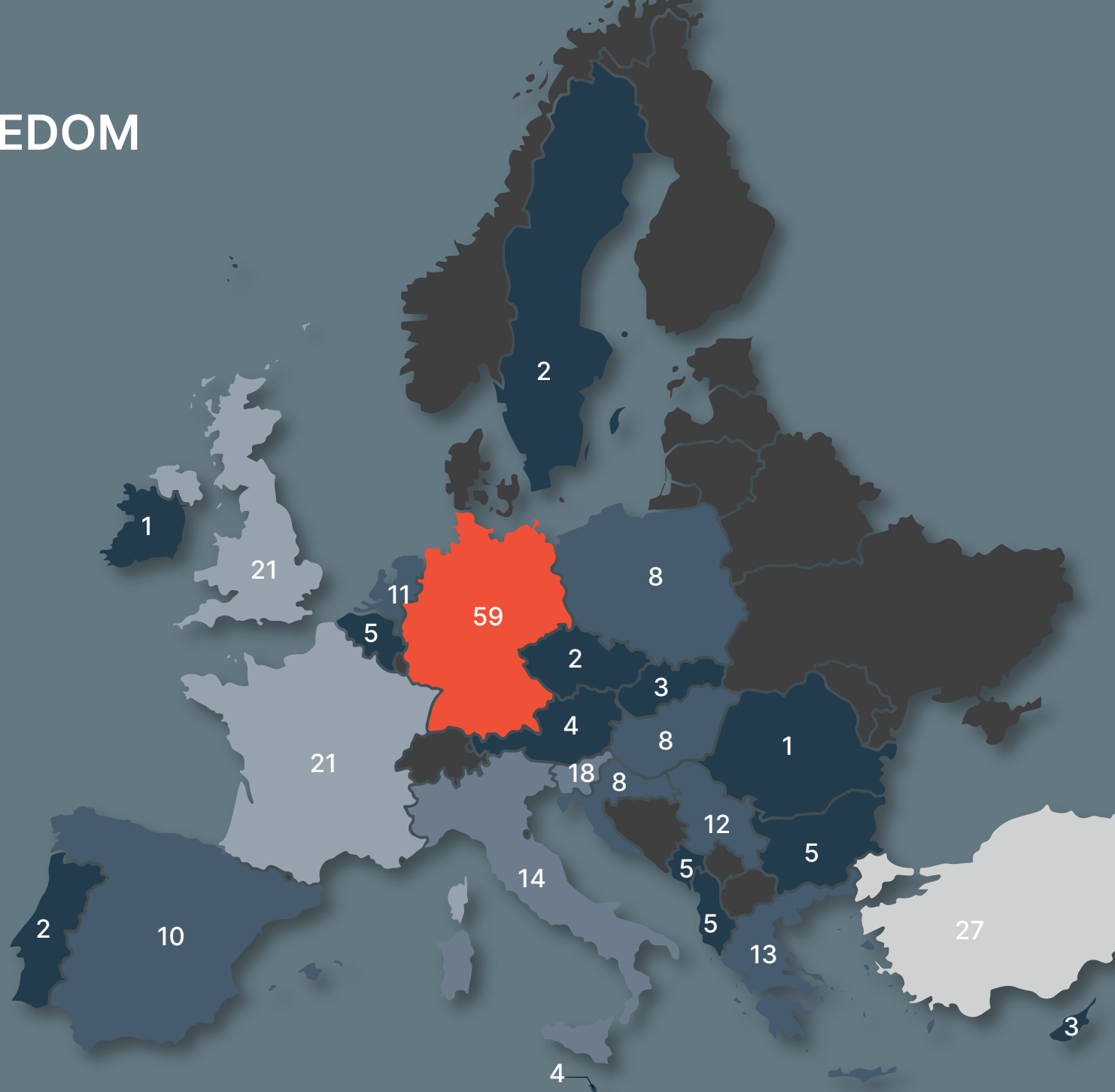


LEGAL
THREAT

30



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

TYPES OF ATTACKS

56
20.6%



PHYSICAL

121
44.5%



VERBAL

27
9.9%



PROPERTY

60
22.1%



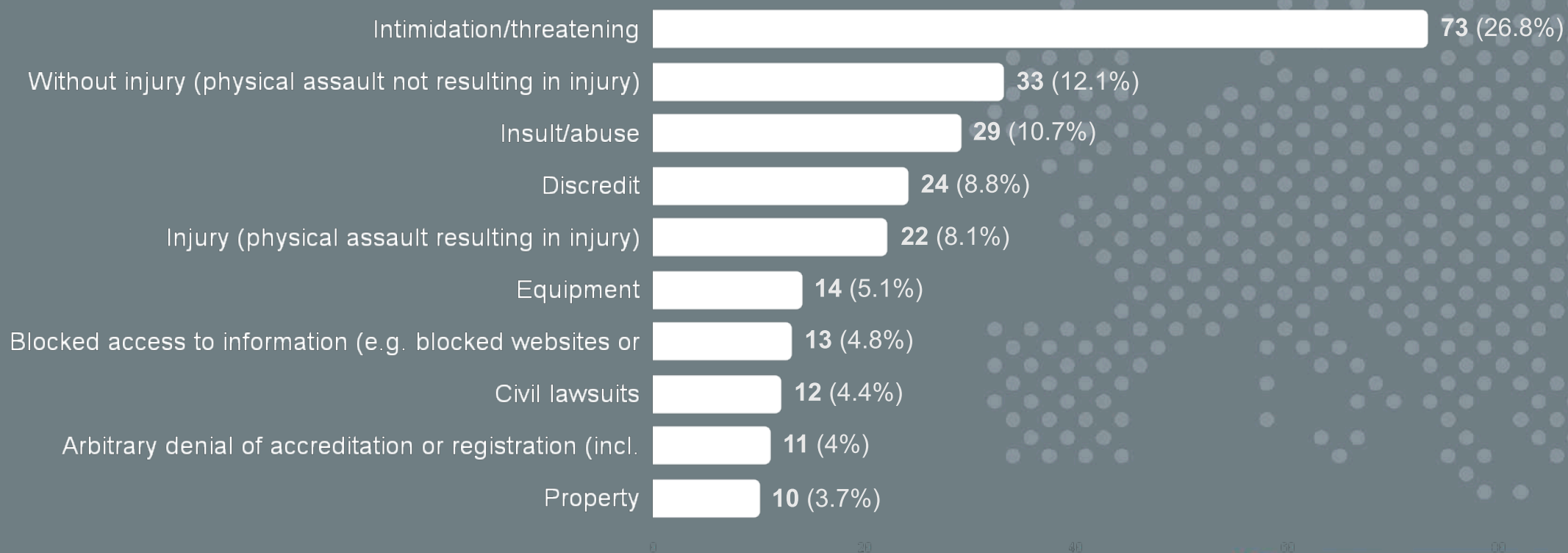
LEGAL

30
11%



CENSORSHIP

TYPES OF ATTACKS - detailed - top 10



MAIN SOURCES OF ATTACKS

112
41.2%



PRIVATE
INDIVIDUAL(S)

48
17.6%



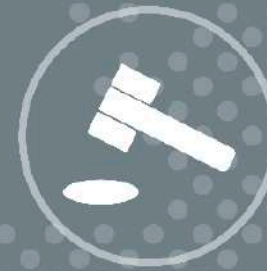
POLICE /
STATE SECURITY

38
14%



LEGISLATION

15
5.5%



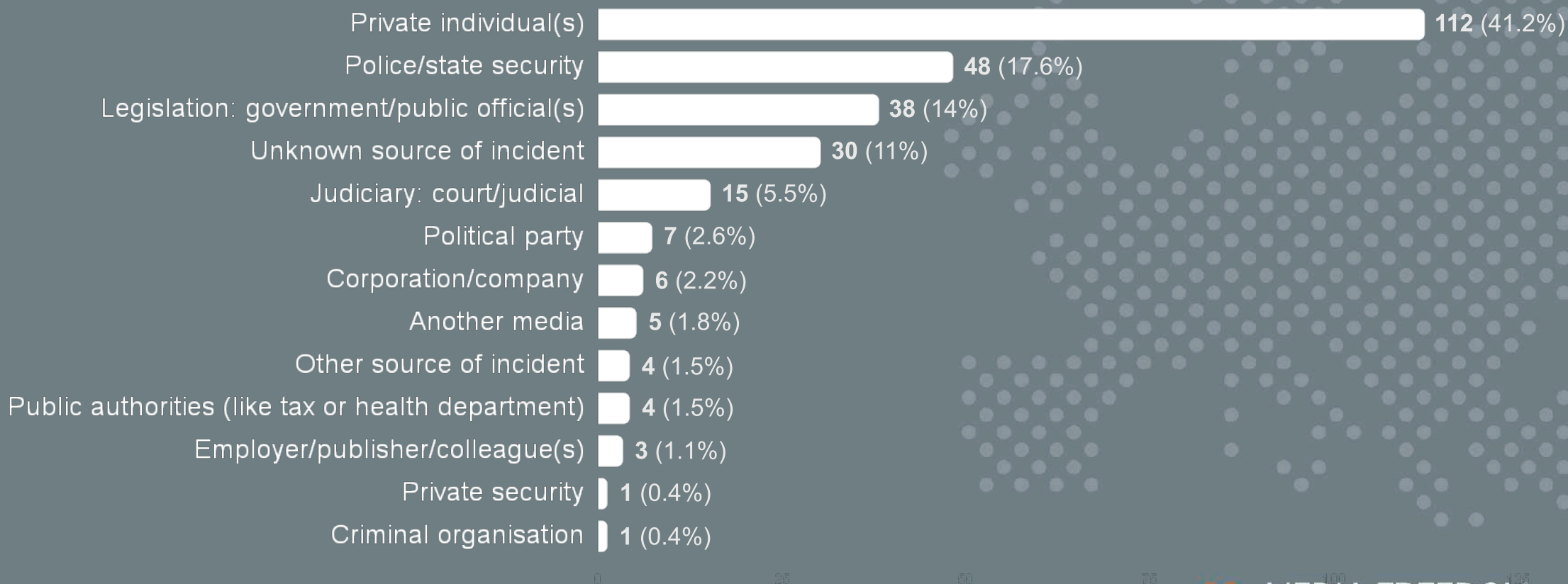
JUDICIARY

30
11%



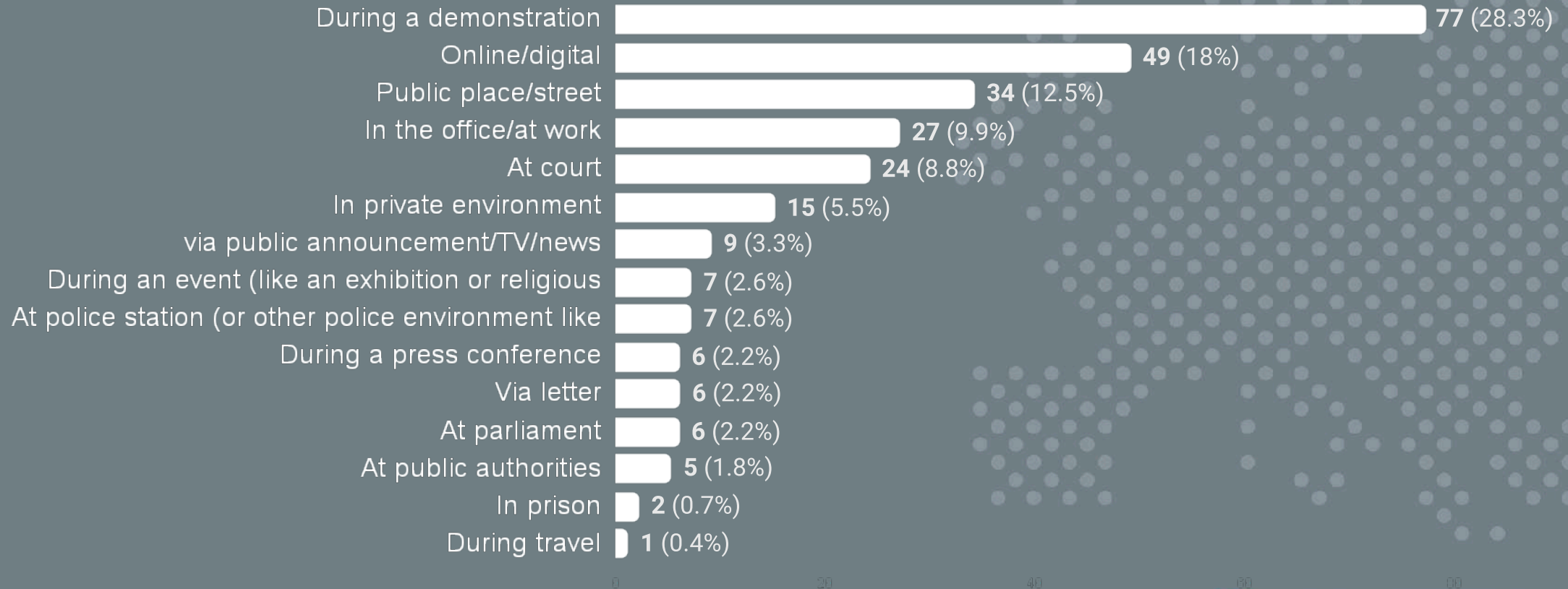
UNKNOWN
SOURCE

SOURCES OF ATTACKS



The data comprises documented Mapping Media Freedom alerts between 1 January 2021 and 30 June 2021 for EU member states, candidate countries, and the United Kingdom, based on the documentation status of 2021-12-06. 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 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.

CONTEXTS OF ATTACKS



The data comprises documented Mapping Media Freedom alerts between 1 January 2021 and 30 June 2021 for EU member states, candidate countries, and the United Kingdom, based on the documentation status of 2021-12-06. 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 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.

Country-by-Country Analysis (EFJ)

Germany

59 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

At the end of this period, Germany had a total of 59 recorded alerts and a total of 90 attacked journalists, media workers or media outlets, putting the country at the top of the EU Member States and Candidates countries in terms of reporting. This number of alerts per country is the highest ever recorded by the MFRR partners since March 2020. While this can partly be explained by the strength of the MFRR network in Germany, this clearly confirms a trend in the deterioration of press and media freedom, especially when it comes to the coverage of demonstrations. With 49 violations, over 80% of all alerts in Germany took place during protests. Again, with 41 alerts, private individuals are the main source of aggression, which shows how low public regard towards journalism and decreasing trust in German traditional media leads to rising attacks.

Protests are still very difficult and often dangerous environments for media workers. The most common types of attacks during protests are intimidation/threat (20 alerts) and physical assault without injury (14). Insult and abuse (8), threat to equipment (7), or arbitrary denial of accreditation or registration (3) are also frequently

recorded incidents in this context. While the vast majority (37) of these violent demonstrations were against Covid-19 measures and vaccination, mostly organised by the “Querdenker” movement, right-wing extremist and leftist protests emerged to be hazardous as well. Acts of police violence against media workers were recorded especially during left-wing demonstrations.

Private individuals were the source of 38 attacks. Protesters often threatened journalists and obstructed their work, considering traditional media as messengers of the government’s propaganda and enemies of their movement. This could particularly be seen at the Querdenker demonstrations where individuals intimidated and insulted journalists, hit their equipment, shoved and even punched a journalist in the face. In one case, on 3 April 2021, an ARD live broadcast had to be terminated as protesters pelted the correspondent, Thomas Denzel, and the camera team with stones. Because of this hostile environment, TV crews from large broadcasters now usually go to Querdenker demonstrations with security guards. While this might create a feeling of safety, it does not always prevent journalists from being attacked, as the aggression against a SWR TV team accompanied by three security staff shows. Antisemitic slurs and several recorded attacks by right-wing extremists further demonstrate what kind of mindsets lead to aggressions against the press.

Police and state security were at the source of 11 alerts. This confirms that the police frequently respond inappropriately

to media workers’ presence at protests and demonstrations. Journalists, media companies, and journalists unions have been raising this issue for a long time. While journalists should be protected and enabled to do their work, it was reported that particularly during leftist protests (9), journalists were arrested, asked to leave, hit, or restricted to demarcated areas. The chaotic nature of demonstrations combined with insufficient training of police officers on how to deal with press staff have also led to several violations of press freedom on 1 May during small demonstrations organised by the political left in Hamburg. In at least three cases, journalists ended up being surrounded by police in groups together with activists, not allowed to leave the circle for hours despite showing their press cards.

Journalists were attacked by the police in other contexts too. Two alerts recorded in May show attempts by the Berlin police to discredit and mock photojournalists via its official Twitter account. In addition to the police, in one case, a politician also discredited journalists, alleging them to have connections to left-wing extremists. Beatrix von Storch, a member of parliament of the AfD, asked the police to remove press representatives who had photographed her upon her arrival at the AfD party convention in Berlin in June, calling them “Antifa photographers”.

France

21 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

The number of cases reported from France increases with each report. With 26 journalists and media workers attacked in six months, the situation has worsened as debates and protests over the Global Security bill and National Policing Plan, which have caused a high number of incidents ([see previous reports](#)), subsided. With eight alerts, harassment and psychological abuse were the most frequent violations.

Six new physical assaults have been recorded on Mapping Media Freedom, five of which resulted in injuries. One of the most violent physical attacks recorded on Mapping Media Freedom happened in France on 27 February 2021. [Christian Lantenois](#), photographer for the regional daily L’Union, was severely injured by a group of individuals who used his camera as a weapon as he was taking photos of gangs about to clash with each other in a district in Reims. The main suspect, a 21-year-old man, is being prosecuted for “attempted murder” and “failure to assist a person in danger.” He has been remanded in custody pending trial.

While a majority of alerts concern journalists and editors (14), photographers, camera operators, or journalists holding cameras are increasingly targeted because of the visibility that their equipment gives them. In March, a journalist for France 3 TV was violently [assaulted](#) as she was about to carry out an interview in a mar-

ketplace where a rally against health measures had been planned. While trying to hit the camera and intimidate the journalist, the person ended up injuring her face. In June, three media workers (a journalist, a cameraman, and a sound recorder), all working for daily news programme Quotidien, were physically assaulted by a celebrity while filming an interview. The cameraman was punched in the face and hit in the head, as the attacker was using the headset as a weapon in order to prevent the journalists from continuing the interview. Earlier in the south of France, a France 2 TV crew of three journalists working for an investigative programme were attacked by a farmer and large landowner who used his pick-up truck to threaten the cameraman, accelerating towards him and coming as close as ten centimeters from his knees before attempting to snatch the camera from him.

A majority of attacks (8) were perpetrated by private individuals while the number of alerts involving law enforcement authorities dropped to five – they mainly concern coverage of events such as blocking access to events or protests, with police preventing journalists from covering the news. Only three cases occurred in the context of protests against Covid-19 measures and vaccination where journalists were intimidated, threatened, insulted, and accused of lying by demonstrators.

Five cases documented threats and attacks against journalists of foreign origin based in France. While it is difficult to confirm, it seems that most of the violations

were coming from abroad. The most serious one involved Azerbaijani dissident and blogger Mahammad Mirzali who was stabbed 16 times by six people while walking down the street in Nantes. He was subsequently the victim of another series of threats, following public appearances in the media. He is reported to have left the country. Journalist Maty Fall, a former Senegalese state radio presenter now living in France, has been the subject of death threats and cyber harassment for her coverage of Senegalese political news on the programme she hosts. A similar story happened to Claire Koç, a reporter for the French public broadcaster of Turkish origin, who faced death threats and harassment online following the publication of her book about her Turkish roots and her path to becoming French. Another alert refers to a legal threat by the consul of Venezuela in France against a Franco-Venezuelan journalist who was questioned by police after a complaint was filed for spreading death threats on social media. The case referred to a Facebook post in which the journalist denounced Nicolas Maduro's regime with regards to human rights and the consul's collusion. After two hours of questioning, the complaint was declared unfounded.

In addition to the above, disturbing threats were made towards two female journalists Nadiya Lazzouni and Morgan Large. Lazzouni received anonymous death threats via the post when a handwritten letter was sent to her home; Large found her car – parked near her house – sabotaged with two bolts removed from a wheel. Both requested police protection, which was eventually refused.

It is also worth mentioning that two media outlets were targeted in retaliation for their coverage. La Dépêche du Midi, a regional newspaper in Toulouse was the target of an arson attempt and the national daily Le Monde lost an advertising campaign commissioned by oil giant Total worth 50,000€ following an article revealing the company's collusion with local military in Myanmar.

Serbia

12 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

After Turkey, Serbia is the candidate country with the second highest number of alerts. In total, 12 attacks affecting 22 journalists, media workers, and media outlets were recorded in the reporting period. As evidenced by the MFRR fact-finding mission organised in January and February 2021, media professionals continue to operate in a highly polarised environment. The data confirm the findings of the mission report published in April 2021: verbal attacks, smear campaigns, online harassment, and legal threats are the main issues affecting journalists in the country.

Media and journalists covering crime are the most exposed. The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), a well-known investigative and non-profit organisation, via its Serbian partner KRIK, is regularly targeted for its reporting, facing smear campaigns by pro-government media and multiple lawsuits. Plaintiffs using court proceedings to

discredit critical reporting generally do not even challenge the facts. The Millennium case, a Belgrade-based construction company, is a telling example. It filed lawsuits against six media outlets, asking for 100,000€ each as compensation for reputation and material damages. Another example of huge damages claimed is the TV channel N1, which is being prosecuted for “untrue information” and “negative” media coverage of the commercial agreement between Telenor mobile services provider and state-owned company Telekom Serbia. Telenor asked for almost one million euro in damages and a temporary ban on the article in question, a demand which was eventually rejected by the Higher Court.

Various forms of attack on journalists' safety were documented, ranging from physical assault to death threats, with intimidation often taking place on social platforms. Journalist Daško Milinović was attacked by two men with pepper spray and metal rods on 16 April in Novi Sad. He said prior to the attack that he was receiving threats on the Internet on a daily basis. On Twitter, Nova.rs' journalist Vojislav Milovancevic was subjected to a wave of attacks coming from several accounts after a Twitter user called on its online community to engage with the journalist. On Instagram, journalist Marko Vidojkovic received death threats in his inbox in response to one of his shows in which the controversial verdict against former Bosnian Serb military chief Ratko Mladic was discussed. The portal NS Uživo, which covers embezzlement, politicians, and criminals, had previously faced online abuse and intimidation attempts when in

April, [threatening graffiti](#) was found on its building's facade.

Also of particular concern are cases of politicians and officials fueling hatred and polarisation instead of creating a safe and enabling environment for journalists. One alert documents verbal abuse by a Serbian [politician](#) who called the journalist Natasa Miljanovic-Zubac a “whore” and a “prostitute” live on TV.

Netherlands

11 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

Despite a strong political commitment to media freedom at the highest level, the Netherlands face a number of challenges with regard to the safety of journalists. Perhaps the most striking trend is an apparent lack of respect for journalists and media workers from citizens with 10 out of the 11 media violations perpetrated by private individuals. Data shows that they follow a narrative whereby the news media are biased, “lying”, and spreading “fake news”. Public broadcaster NOS, in particular, was targeted twice on social media with threatening videos accusing the public broadcaster of attempting to “[fool](#)” [people](#) and, in another case, calling on journalists to “flee the Netherlands” before “something will be done to them”

The six-month period was marked by eight physical assaults including four resulting in injury. Most of them took place as part of the protests and riots which were triggered in reaction to the new Covid-19

measures. In particular, the weekend of 24-25 January 2021 and the following days were marked by violent clashes in a number of Dutch cities after the government announced the introduction of a curfew, the first since the end of World War II. Reporters were threatened, intimidated, abused, and [physically assaulted](#). Two journalists in [Tilburg](#) and [Haarlem](#) were pelted with stones by groups of individuals. Despite the new preventive measures taken by NOS, which include the protection of reporters by security guards accompanying TV crews, the reality on the ground is not very encouraging, with the latter also being targeted. In Urk, a corrosive substance – probably pepper spray – was [sprayed](#) on the security guard's face who required medical treatment on the scene. In March, a reporter for RTV Rijnmond, [Jacco van Giessen](#), received a kick in the stomach while he was doing an interview outside a church in Krimpen an den IJssel, which opened despite strict regulations. The same day in Urk, also near a church, a journalist for PowNed was attacked and [deliberately hit by a car](#), while services were in progress. Several vehicles were driving in circles yelling “go home, man” to the press.

Another assault endangering the lives of a photographer and his girlfriend illustrated the deplorable and violent conditions in which journalists can find themselves doing their job. They were shooting photos of a car fire when several people started hitting the [photographer's car](#) in which they were seated, before one of them rammed the car with a tractor and flipped it over onto its roof in a ditch.

Thanks to the firefighters present on the scene, they could be extracted from the vehicle with small injuries.

The consequences on the mental health of such attacks are difficult to monitor, as journalists do not always feel comfortable talking about what they experience. However, one can imagine the chilling effect and the trauma they cause on a person and on a professional. Occasionally, journalists have expressed themselves following press freedom violations, such as this [press photographer](#) who explained that he was deeply affected following an assault. He was filming outside a football stadium when he was beaten by five supporters, pushed against a van, and injured his hand. He said to his employer that he was sleeping badly: “We only film, what's the problem?”

Country-by-Country Analysis (IPI)

Turkey

28 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

Media freedom in Turkey remains the worst of the countries monitored by the MFRR, with continued and systematic repression of independent media reporting critically on the authorities. At publication, 37 journalists remain behind bars and 170 media outlets have been forcibly closed

since 2016. Those independent outlets and journalists that remain active face multi-level pressure from police violence on the streets and crippling fines by regulators to criminal sanctions in the courts. The violations monitored during this six-month period represent the tip of the iceberg of the ongoing and widespread attack on media critical of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

The most pervasive threat continues to come from legal persecution. Criminal charges related to the alleged dissemination of propaganda and terrorism-related crimes remain the most common sanctions used for imprisoning journalists. Many trials and appeals stem from charges brought in 2016 during the height of the crackdown. In April, journalists Müyesser Yıldız and İsmail Dükkel were sentenced to prison over their critical reporting on military operations of Turkish armed forces in Syria. In June, Bursa Muhallif online news site managing editor, Ozan Kaplanoğlu, was also [sentenced](#) to one year and ten months in prison for reporting on statements against Turkish military operations in Syria in 2018.

Journalists also face the threat of arbitrary detention and police raids. In January, police stormed the offices of the Etkin News Agency and detained journalist [Pinar Gayip](#), who was already facing a criminal trial. Possession of articles written by banned media outlets has even been used to imprison journalists. In March, İsmail Çoban, a journalist with a now-closed pro-Kurdish newspaper who has been imprisoned since 2018, was [sentenced](#) to an additional two years

after articles of another banned newspaper were found in his cell. The articles were cited as criminal evidence and Çoban was sentenced for “bringing illegal /banned items into the prison facility”.

Even journalists living outside of Turkey have not escaped judicial pressure. In May, journalist Deniz Yücel, who lives in Germany, was indicted by the İstanbul Chief Public Prosecutor’s Office on the charge of “degrading the State of the Republic of Turkey, its government, judicial bodies, and the security organization of the state” for articles he had written while a correspondent for Die Welt in 2016, including one which referred to the “genocide of the Armenians”. Multiple other cases were documented in which journalists and editors-in-chief were summoned or interrogated over articles they had published which had angered the government.

Journalists also face physical violence and threats of violence. The most extreme case occurred in March, when Hazım Özsü, a local radio host for Rahmet FM, was shot dead in his Basra home by a man who later said that he disliked Özsü’s comments regarding religious values. In March, Levent Gültekin, a columnist and programme host at Turkey’s Halk TV, was assaulted by a mob of around 25 people outside the TV station, likely over his criticism of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). In January, Orhan Uğuroğlu, a Turkish TV commentator and Ankara correspondent of the newspaper Yeniçağ, was attacked outside his home in Ankara when three men tried to run him over in their car. He escaped without serious injuries.

Multiple alerts were linked to coverage of protests and demonstrations. Numerous journalists suffered injuries after being physically assaulted or targeted with police rubber bullets. In February, Sendika.org reporter Murat Bay was punched by a police officer while recording injuries to protesters. To compound problems further, in April the General Directorate of Security issued a directive banning all audio-visual recordings of Turkish police by citizens at protests, sparking concerns the rules would affect the ability of photo-journalists to cover protests and expose police brutality. On multiple occasions, journalists have had their equipment damaged, confiscated or had photos deleted by police officers, who act with near total impunity.

Turkey’s government-controlled media regulator, the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), continued to be used as a tool to sanction and fine media outlets in a discriminatory manner. In May, it issued a fine against Exxen TV for a broadcast featuring the country’s first openly trans model. Government ministers continue to openly smear and accuse the media of publishing so-called “fake news” and spreading lies, fostering a climate of hostility towards critical media. Journalists such as Habertürk TV economy news manager Ebru Baki that step too far out of line and criticise government politicians have been fired by their editors. Meanwhile, Turkey’s government-controlled internet regulator has repeatedly blocked access to the websites of independent media outlets.

Slovenia

18 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

Media freedom in Slovenia, while overall resilient compared to neighbouring countries, continued to face pressure from the government of Prime Minister Janez Janša. The country saw the fifth highest number of violations, heightening concerns and leading to an online fact-finding mission by the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) in May 2021. The flash-point of attacks on independent journalism during this time involved the financial suffocation of the Slovenian Press Agency (STA) and the increasing political interference at the public broadcaster.

At the beginning of the year, UKOM, the Government Communications Directorate, suspended the financing of the press agency for the second time in three months, in what media rights groups called an attempt to destabilise the agency through financial blackmail. The PM and leading government officials then called for the STA’s director general to step down and “be held accountable” for his management. Pressure on the STA’s leadership was ratcheted up in May when the PM smeared the director by accusing him of involvement in the “murder” of a former STA editor-in-chief more than a decade ago. UKOM also faced accusations in February of trying to control the media narrative of the pandemic after TV Slovenija reported that government officials and advisers were refused clearance by UKOM to appear on news shows.

Discreditation and denigration of media outlets by public figures remained a cause for concern, with many of these attacks launched by the Prime Minister himself. In February, the PM made headlines across Europe after he tried to discredit Politico and its journalist Lili Bayer, calling them “liars” over her report which examined the state of media freedom in Slovenia. In April, the PM drew further criticism for accusing daily news show 24ur and its editor-in-chief of “persistently lying” about the Covid-19 pandemic and contributing significantly to the death toll in the country through its reporting. The same month, the PM accused German journalist Nikolaus Neumaier from ARD of “censorship in the style” of the Nazi propaganda outlet Der Stürmer.

Co-ordinated smears against journalists by far-right media outlets linked to the ruling party continued between January and June 2021. In March, independent investigative outlet Pod črto, was smeared as an “online gestapo” by far-right website Nova 24. In April, far-right online magazine Časnik.si published an article about RTV Slovenia journalist Erika Žnidaršič which attacked her journalistic credibility and suggested that someone might “maliciously stab you in the ribs”; drawing widespread condemnation. In February, a camera operator from Nova24TV was prevented from recording events at a conference held by the opposition Social Democrat party on politically motivated grounds.

Physical attacks on journalists remain rare in Slovenia. In January, however, a photographer working for the Megafon.si was

physically threatened and pressured to delete photos they had taken. The perpetrators were later arrested. In April, [Bojan Požar](#), a journalist from news and opinion website Požareport, was threatened with violence online after writing about competition issues regarding the taxi drivers union. Female journalists in particular continue to receive the brunt of online harassment. The experience of [Nataša Markovič](#), a journalist at Slovenian public broadcaster RTV, who received an email with misogynistic threats and insults is increasingly common. Legal threats remain rare in Slovenia. However, in May the Slovenian Government Office for Development and Cohesion Policy initiated criminal proceedings against the weekly political magazine Mladina after it published a leaked government plan for its post-Covid-19 recovery.

Italy

14 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

In Italy, the safety of journalists reporting on protests and demonstrations organised by anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown groups posed the biggest concern for media freedom. Hostility against the press, including threats, intimidation, and anti-media chants were a common phenomenon at such events, some of which were organised by far-right groups. These attacks reflected a worrying growing anti-press sentiment in some segments of Italian society. A high-profile wiretapping case meanwhile renewed concern over journalistic privacy and source protection.

Attacks and threats against journalists covering Covid-19-related protests were documented across the country, from Bologna and Florence to Rome. Leading newspapers and the public broadcaster were routinely accused of spreading lies and “fake news” about the pandemic. On multiple occasions protesters also tried to steal or damage journalistic equipment. Online harassment of journalists covering such events by trolls on social media was also documented, with journalists’ addresses and personal information being published on some occasions. In some cases, journalists were [injured](#) after becoming caught in clashes between police and protesters.

Surveillance of journalists emerged as a serious issue when in March 2021, it was revealed that numerous Italian journalists had their [phones wiretapped](#) by Sicilian prosecutors in Trapani as part of their investigation into sea rescue NGOs and charities. Prosecutors recorded dozens of conversations between journalists and NGO workers, breaching source anonymity. Media freedom groups said the move was one of the most serious attacks on the press in recent Italian history. Concerns over source protection increased further in June after the Lazio regional administrative court issued a [ruling](#) ordering the investigative programme Report to reveal its sources for a report on the management of public funds in the Lombardy region.

Online harassment and threats against media, especially women journalists, remains an engrained problem. [Silvia Bergamin](#), of Il Mattino di Padova, was subjec-

ted to a wave of sexist insults and called a “prostitute” on Facebook after writing about a drug-charge arrest. Threats from far-right groups resurfaced in March when [Carlo Verdelli](#), chief editor of one of Italy’s most well-respected newspapers, La Repubblica, was placed under police protection after receiving repeated threats from neo-Nazi groups.

Physical attacks and [intimidation](#) of journalists remained a [concern](#). In April, journalist [Carmen La Gatta](#) and her TV crew were reporting on illegal occupation of houses in the north-western city of Cuneo when they were attacked by a man wielding a metal chain. She sustained cuts to her hands and face during the incident and required treatment. Threats to journalists’ safety from organised crime groups, while less frequent than in previous years, continued. In June, it was [revealed](#) that police had discovered that a convicted mafia boss had instructed his son to “silence” journalist Marilena Natale.

Journalists also faced disproportionate obstructions during court reporting due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In January, Italy’s largest mafia trial in three decades began but with journalists [banned](#) from recording video or audio within the courtroom. The restriction comes after a decision by a judge in the trial, with Covid-19 restrictions cited as the main justification. In April, a journalist from the Sicilian city of Enna was barred from entering the Palace of Justice under Covid-19 rules to report on a court case involving a priest accused of aggravated sexual violence against minors.

Greece

13 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

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

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

Even then, however, challenges for journalistic reporting on protests were clear. In February, Documento photojournalist [Mario-Rafael Biko](#) was detained by police while covering a protest in Athens, even after he presented evidence of his role as a journalist. Later that month, a group of police officers in riot gear and armed with plastic shields assaulted the photojournalist [Yannis Liakos](#) in front of the Greek Parliament. Days later, at least 15 photojournalists and media workers covering another protest in central Athens were [obstructed, harassed, and targeted](#) with disproportionate force by police officers. In none of these cases did the police officers involved face professional sanctions.

Legal pressure from police, while far rarer, is not an uncommon phenomenon in Greece. In March, an [arrest warrant](#) was issued against the publisher of Documento, Kostas Vaxevanis, by members of the Greek police for allegedly violating data privacy rights. The warrant was issued following a criminal lawsuit filed by 22 police officers from the Attica General Police Directorate (GADA). This followed an extrajudicial letter sent by the officers in which they denied allegations printed by Documento, which had published interviews with protesters who allege they were severely beaten and threatened by GADA officers while in custody. While the arrest warrant against Vaxevanis was valid for 24 hours and was never acted upon, it had a chilling effect on the media.

The safety of journalists more broadly was also an area of concern. After the murder of Karaivaz, [Vaxevanis](#) published

an article stating that he had been informed that a contract had been tendered for his assassination within the criminal underworld. After the alleged threat was reported, Vaxevanis was placed under increased protection. In February, the offices of Greek TV station Action 24 were [firebombed](#) and attacked with stones by individuals protesting in support of convicted terrorist Dimitris Koufontinas. In June, two gas canisters exploded in front of journalist Giannis Pretenteris' house in Athens at 4am damaging two vehicles. Police launched an investigation to assess whether the explosion was part of a plot to kill or intimidate the journalist.

Journalists reporting on the contentious issue of illegal refugee “pushbacks” in the Aegean continued to face [pressure](#) from government officials and law enforcement authorities. In the latest case, in May a reporting team from the Dutch public broadcaster VPRO was [arbitrarily detained](#) by police while trying to document an alleged “pushback” of migrants by the Greek authorities in the forest near the town of Dikaia. Police detained the reporting crew and took them to a police station for questioning, demanding access to the team’s recordings.

Cross-Regional Thematic Comparative Analysis

Online threats (EFJ)

49 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

The number of attacks taking place online increased over the last reporting period, from 14,1% in 2020 (March to December) to 18,2% in the first half of 2021. They occurred in 16 countries and affected a total of 68 media companies, journalists, family members, and journalistic sources. Slovenia, with 11 cases, was the most affected country within the period, followed by the United Kingdom (7), Turkey (4), and France (4).

An increasing number of threats sent via email, on social media, or websites were reported as the awareness around this issue grew. Journalists and media freedom organisations have been warning of the mental health consequences of such threats on media professionals who may feel isolated, at risk, or defenceless in the face of such violent events. The MFRR identified a large majority of the cases (88,8%) – all directly related to their journalistic work – as harassment and psychological abuse, ranging from threatening messages, attempts to discredit a journalist or their work, insults, to trolling. Death

threats in particular require extra attention and support, be it moral, psychological, or legal. The case of Belgian investigative journalist [Samira Atillah](#), who has announced that she will distance herself from Twitter due to escalating intimidations and threats, illustrates how online attacks are directly impacting the professional and personal lives of journalists.

While online attacks are more often directed against male journalists (20), female journalists (16 cases) are more likely to receive sexual or family-related comments. In the United Kingdom, Telegraph journalist [Camilla Tominey](#) received threats on her website with mentions of her children and husband. In Northern Ireland, Sunday World [Patricia Devlin](#) has been receiving numerous messages online threatening her and her child. In Italy, journalist Silvia Bergamin working for Il Mattino di Padova was directly quoted in more than 60 Facebook comments containing sexist insults and words such as “prostitute”.

At the source of the majority of the online threats, we find individuals (18) as well as a significant number of public figures in high-ranking positions (11), actively contributing to creating this toxic environment. In 10 cases however, the source was unknown when the alert was written. This phenomenon is particularly important in Slovenia, where the Prime Minister (PM) Janez Janšaregularly uses his official and private Twitter accounts to express his dissatisfaction with a publication or the little consideration he has for journalists. The country’s press agency [STA](#) has been targeted multiple times during the contractual dispute opposing it to

the government, with Jansa and the government communication office Ukom director accusing STA management of lying, breaking the law, and hiding documents. The rhetoric is that media professionals critical of the government policy are “not telling the truth”. A journalist for Politico Europe, [Lili Bayer](#), personally experienced it after she published a report on the state of media freedom in Slovenia. The report shed light on the government’s “campaign against journalists”. Besides harassment and intimidation, journalists and their sources were exposed to surveillance, by the judiciary in particular. In two cases, data such as location, contact details, and journalists’ conversations were collected in order to track down journalistic sources under the pretext of contributing to ongoing judicial investigations. In Italy, at least seven journalists had their phones [wiretapped](#) by Sicilian prosecutors who were seeking to establish links between sea rescue NGOs’ alleged complicity in people smuggling and illegal immigration in the Mediterranean. In Portugal, for two months, four journalists were under surveillance. Their personal communications were accessible to the police, without authorisation, as part of a wider investigation into high-level leaks related to the so-called [E-Toupira corruption case](#).

The number of hacking and DDoS attacks remains relatively low with two cases reported. Both cyber-attacks were related to reports about a local businessman’s alleged links to drug trafficking in Cyprus. [Nuri Silay](#) and [Özgür Gazete](#) newspapers were targeted with millions of requests that caused them to crash. The hacking followed intimidation attempts, threaten-

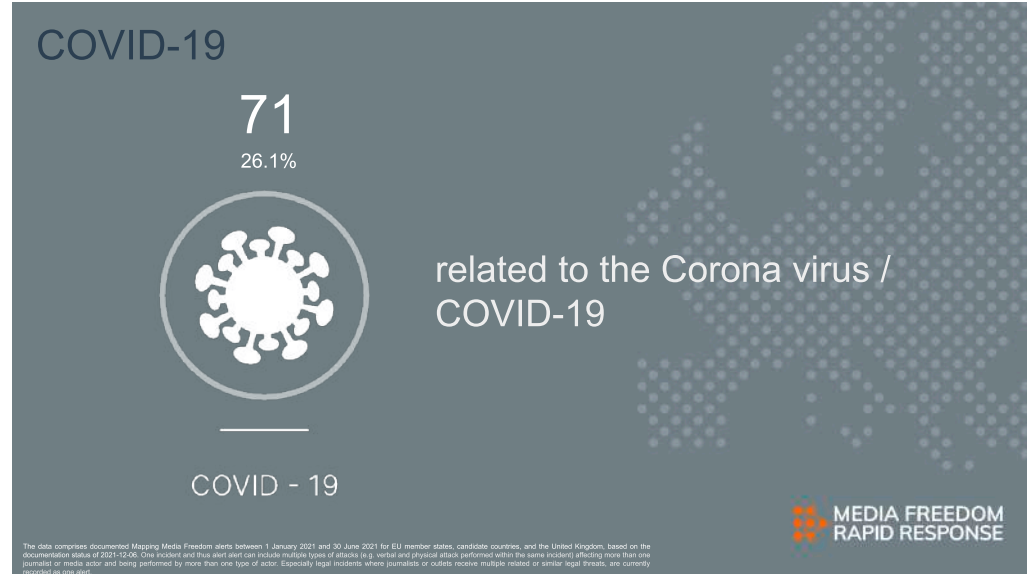
ing calls, and pressure to take down the articles in question. It lasted for 15 days.

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

Attacks and threats against journalists linked to Covid-19 by private individuals (IPI)

55 Number of Mapping Media Freedom alerts within reporting period

January to June 2021 saw the continuation of a worrying new trend in Europe: a wave of physical and online attacks on journalists reporting on Covid-19 and anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown protests. During this six-month period, 55 incidents involving assaults, aggression, and intimidation against journalists linked to Covid-19 by private individuals or unknown sources, affecting 65 different journalists or media workers, were documented. Three quarters of the incidents took place during protests and demonstrations linked to the pandemic, with the majority



of other cases in nearby public places, at work or online. While 96% of the documented attacks affected journalists, a minority were directed at the offices of media organisations in the form of vandalism or damage to property. Attacks were documented across nine countries monitored by the MMF.

Attacks came in different forms. MMF documented 19 physical attacks on media workers. Five cases involved serious attacks which required treatment from medical staff at the scene or at a hospital. A further 14 cases involved physical attacks in which the journalists or media workers were able to escape unhurt or did not suffer lasting injury. Two thirds of all violations documented (33 cases) involved intimidation, insult, and vocal abuse of journalists by protesters. A further nine cases of attacks on journalistic equipment were documented, involving

protesters attempting to steal or damage cameras and other recording equipment.

Reasons for the continued high numbers of alerts linked to Covid-19 were varied. During the end of winter and spring of 2021, many states in the EU were experiencing second or third waves of infections. In some member states, public frustration and economic woes over continued lockdown measures boiled over into frequent protests, which were accompanied by an increase in attacks on the media reporting on them. While many of these attacks came from anti-government groups protesting mask and vaccine mandates, others came from members of far-right groups which had hijacked rallies to push their own agenda. Online conspiracy theories and disinformation shared via social media platforms about the role of the press in reporting on the pandemic also acted as a catalyst for the hostility and

distrust of journalists reporting on the coronavirus.

69% of all the cases documented were in Germany, where the MMF monitored 38 different violations. This high number of recorded incidents may be partly explained by the extensive monitoring of well organised domestic journalistic associations during protests. Nonetheless, attacks on media from people attending Querdenker (lateral thinking) demonstrations occurred almost every weekend when protests were held at different locations across the country. Many of these protests saw large contingents of far-right groups, who according to journalists were responsible for many of the worst threats and attacks. In multiple cases, Querdenker protesters manhandled or became physically aggressive towards journalists as they were trying to film events or interview individual demonstrators.

Protests against government measures to combat coronavirus also led to violence against journalists in the Netherlands, a country not used to physical assaults on the press. MMF documented a total of nine attacks on the media linked to their reporting on the pandemic protests. When riots against the curfew measures erupted in mid-January, several journalists and TV crews were threatened, insulted, or physically attacked as they covered the unrest. On January 23, a TV crew for the public broadcaster NOS also faced intimidation and obstruction as they tried to film a coronavirus test centre which had been burnt down. The security guard accompanying the crew was

sprayed in the face with a corrosive substance during an altercation.

Violence continued when a reporter from the Brabants Dagblad was pelted with stones and chased by protesters in Tilburg. The same day a cameraman and reporter, Jan Peels from Omroep Brabant, also had stones thrown at them by rioters in Eindhoven. In Enschede, a freelance press photographer working for daily newspaper Tubantia was hit and kicked in the shin. During the attack, one man tried to steal her camera and another called her a “cancer journalist”. Two other photographers from Haarlems Dagblad, Laurens Bosch and Michel van Bergen, had stones thrown at them in the Schalkwijk district of Haarlem. In March, Mark Baanders, a journalist for PowNed, was assaulted and deliberately hit by a car after he reported on churches which had opened their doors to visitors in breach of anti-coronavirus regulations. Another reporter for RTV Rijnmond, Jacco van Giessen, was kicked in the stomach while interviewing someone in front of a church about the same topic.

These attacks, and others documented across the EU, raised growing concerns about journalists’ safety and the willingness of editors to send crews into the field to report live from such protests. The violence also led to renewed focus on the safety of journalists reporting on protests at the EU level and the policies that police and law enforcement authorities can implement to ensure journalists are protected while reporting from demonstrations.

Conclusion

The fourth Monitoring Report is again shaped by the impact of Covid-19 on media freedom. While at the beginning of the crisis, access to information and sources was one of the main difficulties faced by journalists, the suspension of Freedom of Information Acts, online press conferences without proper access to public representatives, and more recently attacks by anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine protesters have become more common.

Journalists have become the target of many protesters, who accuse them of being part of the system that they want to fight. Conspiracy theorists and far-right groups, particularly in the countries where anti-vaccine movements have been strong, have attacked, verbally abused, and harassed journalists.

Online harassment has also been one of the trends on the rise in the past months, ranging from threatening messages to death threats and psychological abuse. In some cases, this is done by political representatives and prominent figures, which can incite physical and verbal attacks against journalists and media workers.

The social and economic consequences of the pandemic have brought radicalisation and polarisation, and the media has become a target for all those unhappy with measures or the handling of the pandemic.

This is why protecting journalists from physical, psychological, and legal attacks must be a top priority during a time of social turmoil and uncertainty so they can perform their duty when they are needed the most.

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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