MEDIA FREEDOM RAPID RESPONSE

MAPPING MEDIA FREEDOM

# MONITORING REPORT

***JANUARY - JUNE 2024***

BY EFJ - IPI - ECPMF

Co-funded by the European Union

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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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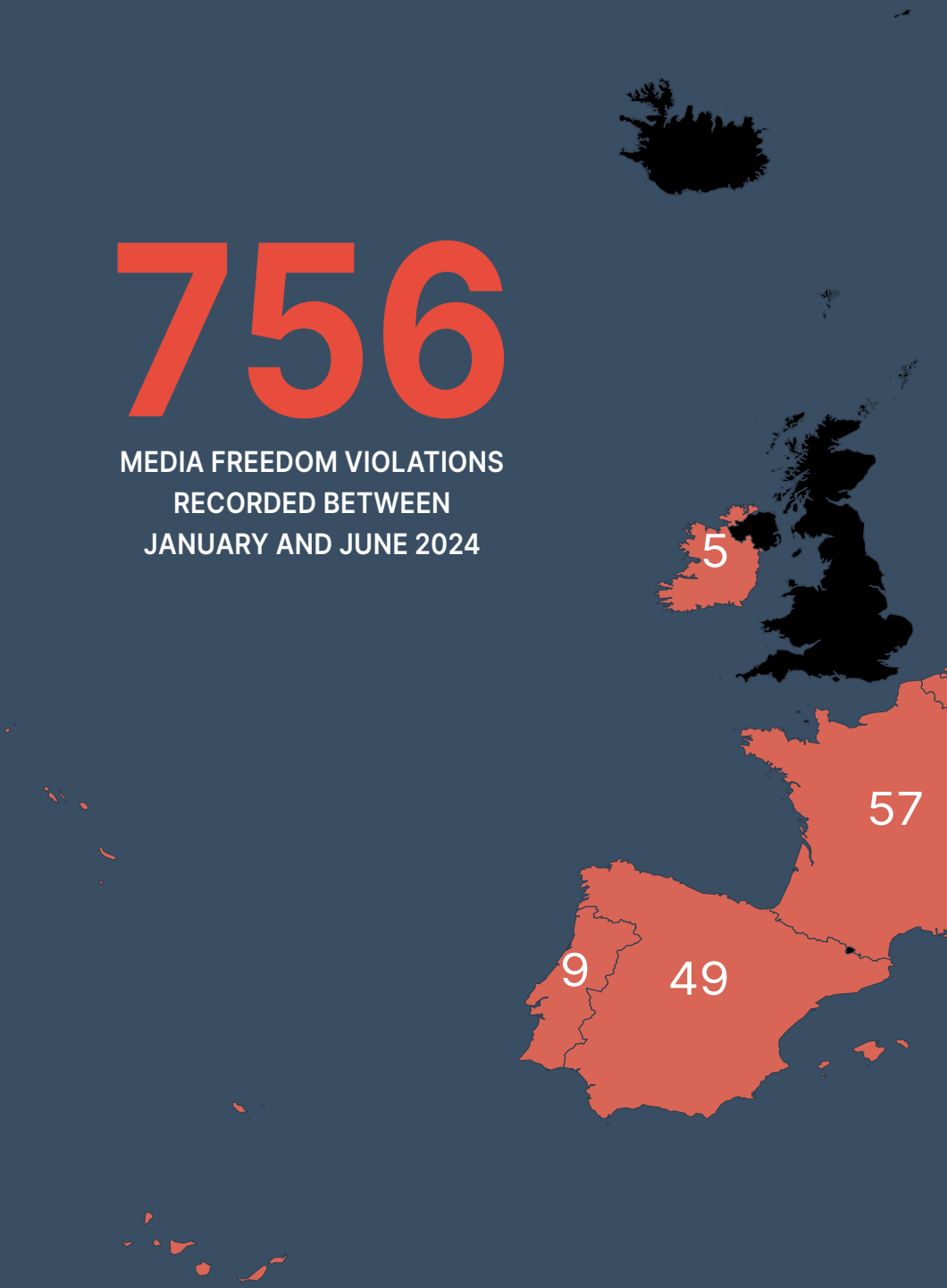
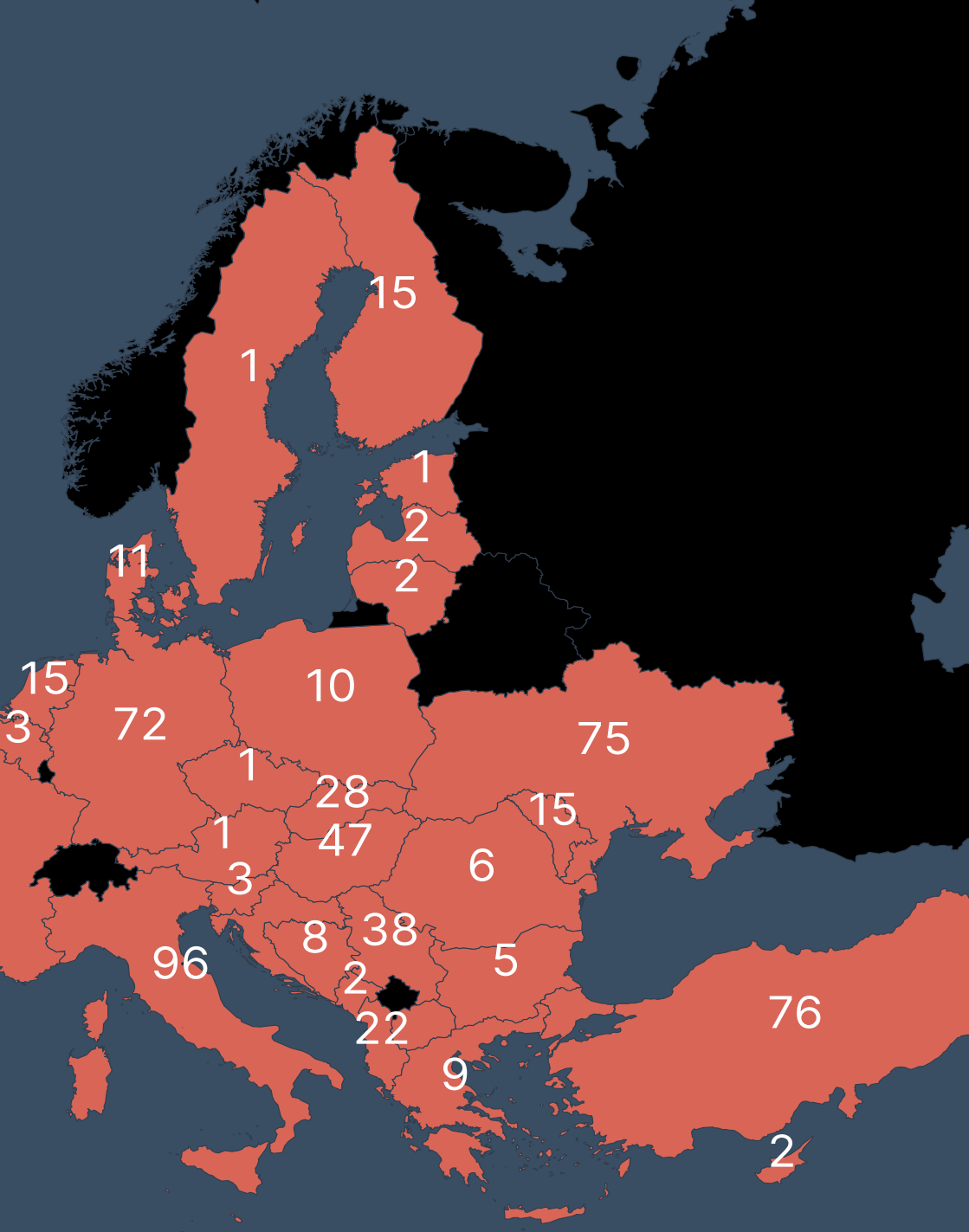
# 756

MEDIA FREEDOM VIOLATIONS
RECORDED BETWEEN
JANUARY AND JUNE 2024






*Map with alerts in all countries (EU MS + CC including Ukraine and Moldova)*

# INTRODUCTION

The Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) monitors press and media freedom violations in European Union (EU) Member States and candidate countries. This monitoring report covers the first six months of 2024. On our monitoring database, Mapping Media Freedom (MapMF), 756 press freedom violations (alerts) have been documented for this period, impacting 1,212 media-related persons or entities located in 35 countries. Intimidation and threatening of media workers were the most prominent type of violations during this period, closely followed by blocking of journalistic activities and discrediting, harassment, insults, and bullying.

This report provides insights into the state of media freedom from different perspectives.

The overall issues and trends of press freedom violations in EU Member States and candidate countries within the reporting period are outlined in the Overview chapter. Three thematic chapters are dedicated to the selected topics of anti-media laws, spoofing attacks including deep fakes, and press freedom violations related to elections, offering quantitative and qualitative analysis. Furthermore, ten country reports present a summary of the situation and most relevant threats in six selected EU Member States Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, Hungary and Slovakia; and in the following four candidate countries: Serbia, Albania, Ukraine, and finally Georgia, as a first time country to be covered after it was announced as a candidate country in December 2023.

The Overview chapter presents information and statistics about the main issues and trends of media freedom separately for EU Member States and candidate countries. It provides insights on types of press freedom violations recorded, the perpetrators (sources), as well as the type of places (contexts) the incidents happened.

In the 27 EU Member States, MapMF reported 474 alerts impacting 748 persons or entities related to media. MapMF recorded a rise of verbal attacks, as well as a huge increase in censorship and interference in journalistic work. Physical attacks decreased in this period but remain a concern. Private individuals remain the main perpetrators, with a concerning rise in the number of attacks by government and public officials. Online attacks again increased further.

In the eight candidate countries MapMF documented 282 alerts impacting 464 persons or entities related to media within the reporting period. In candidate countries, verbal attacks also show a high frequency. Legal incidents show a much higher frequency in candidate countries compared to the EU Member States, signalling a troubling situation in the judicial system and legislative processes, resulting in the relatively high number of cases in these countries.

The three thematic chapters address pressing topics highlighted by MFRR.

Legislative developments restricting media freedom have been varied; however a recent trend shows that especially taken under illiberal settings, there are governments proposing sovereignty and attempts at limiting foreign influence as the basis of blocking activities of independent media. To address this trend, we have included a thematic chapter on Anti-Media Laws.

Spoofing attacks involving impersonation, identity disguise, falsifying data with the intention of deception, or manipulation have been threatening media freedom. Spoofing involves deep fakes showing journalists and media workers, as well as fake websites imitating the design and structure of news portals to spread false information.

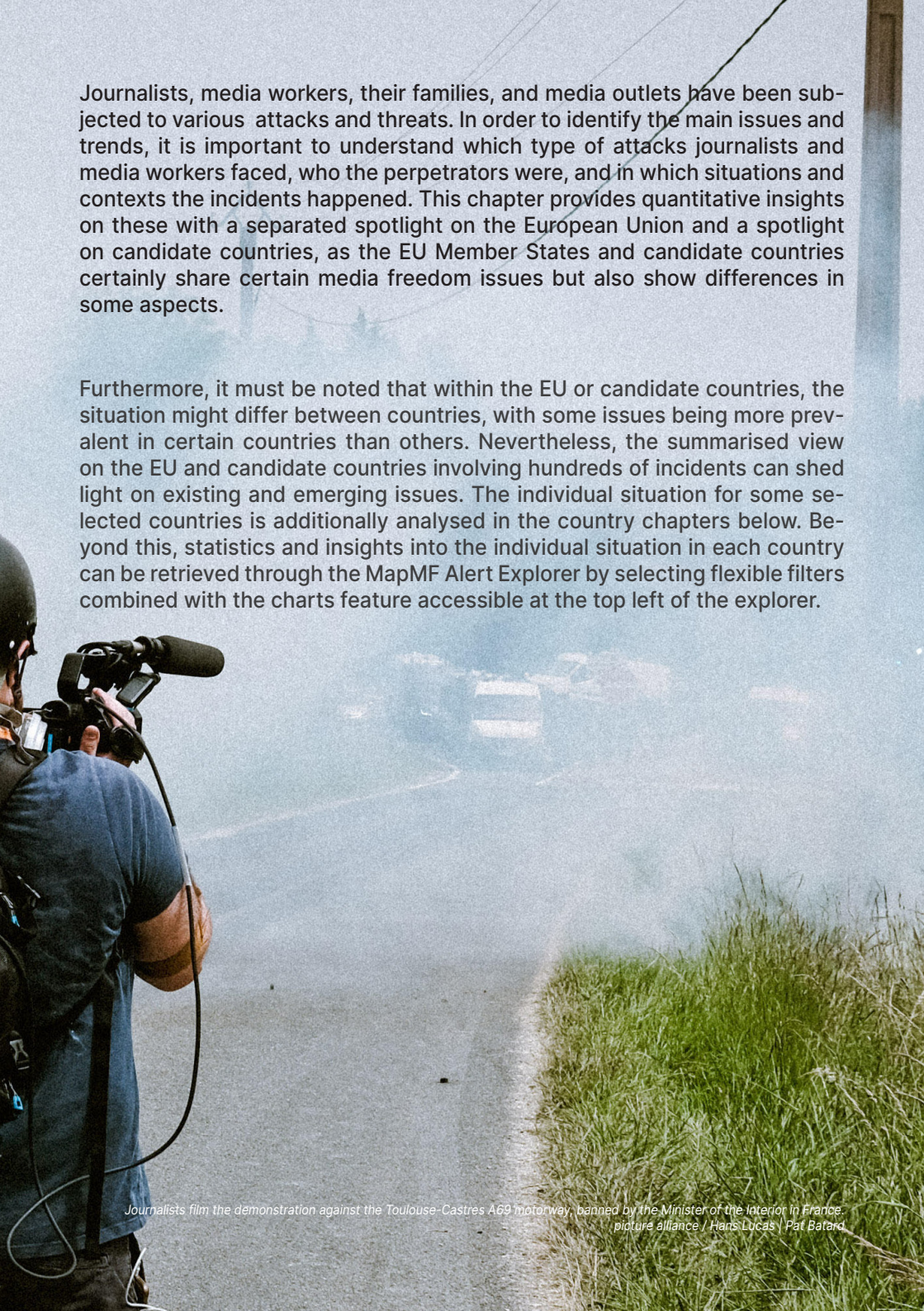
Elections have been a major topic for 2024. Close to 20 national, local, regional, and also European elections have taken place in the first half of the year, with media freedom being targeted at different levels during these periods.

This 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 Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) project which tracks, monitors, and supports journalists, media workers and outlets that have been targeted. The project is co-financed 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 continuously updated, collects, and visualises all alerts documented by the monitoring officers.

# OVERVIEW ON GENERAL ISSUES AND TRENDS

Journalists, media workers, their families, and media outlets have been subjected to various attacks and threats. In order to identify the main issues and trends, it is important to understand which type of attacks journalists and media workers faced, who the perpetrators were, and in which situations and contexts the incidents happened. This chapter provides quantitative insights on these with a separated spotlight on the European Union and a spotlight on candidate countries, as the EU Member States and candidate countries certainly share certain media freedom issues but also show differences in some aspects.

Furthermore, it must be noted that within the EU or candidate countries, the situation might differ between countries, with some issues being more prevalent in certain countries than others. Nevertheless, the summarised view on the EU and candidate countries involving hundreds of incidents can shed light on existing and emerging issues. The individual situation for some selected countries is additionally analysed in the country chapters below. Beyond this, statistics and insights into the individual situation in each country can be retrieved through the MapMF Alert Explorer by selecting flexible filters combined with the charts feature accessible at the top left of the explorer.



*Journalists film the demonstration against the Toulouse-Castres A69 motorway, banned by the Minister of the Interior in France.*
*picture alliance / Hans Lucas | Pat Batard*

# *Spotlight on the European Union*

In the European Union Member States, MapMF reported 474 alerts involving 748 attacked media-related persons or entities within the reporting period.

Journalists and media workers in the EU were most frequently subjected to intimidation and threatening, happening in nearly every fifth recorded incident (19.4%, 92 alerts). Other verbal attacks, such as discrediting (76 alerts), or harassment, insult, or bullying (66) were also recorded in an increased amount and reached approximately similar numbers already in the first six months of 2024 as those recorded for the full year of 2023.

Furthermore, journalists were blocked while doing their work in every sixth incident (16.9%) – ranging from being prevented or obstructed from reaching reporting locations, accessing information, or distributing their journalistic content. These kinds of incidents experienced a huge rise compared to the previous year and became the second most frequent type of attack. Already more cases have been recorded in the first 6 months of 2024 (80 alerts) than for the full year of 2023 (76 alerts) in this category.

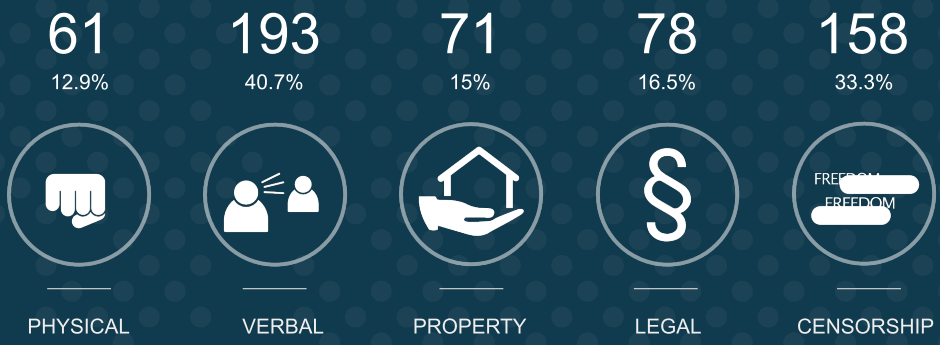
However, not only the most frequent type of attacks raise concerns. Editorial interference (44 alerts) also increased. Spoofing including deep fakes or fake websites to discredit media or to spread false information were on the rise (14 alerts). Twelve legislative initiatives regarding laws restricting press freedom were recorded in the EU. Journalists and media companies faced various legal incidents, including lawsuits or arrests. Though there was some decrease in the number of physical attacks compared to last year, the number of recorded incidents still remained high with 61 physical attacks, and 27 of them resulting in injuries.

In terms of perpetrators, private individuals remained the most frequent aggressors covering nearly every third incident (32.1%, 152 alerts), followed by government and public officials, which increased to 22.4% and having already nearly as many incidents recorded in the first 6 months (106 alerts) as in the full year of 2023 (109).

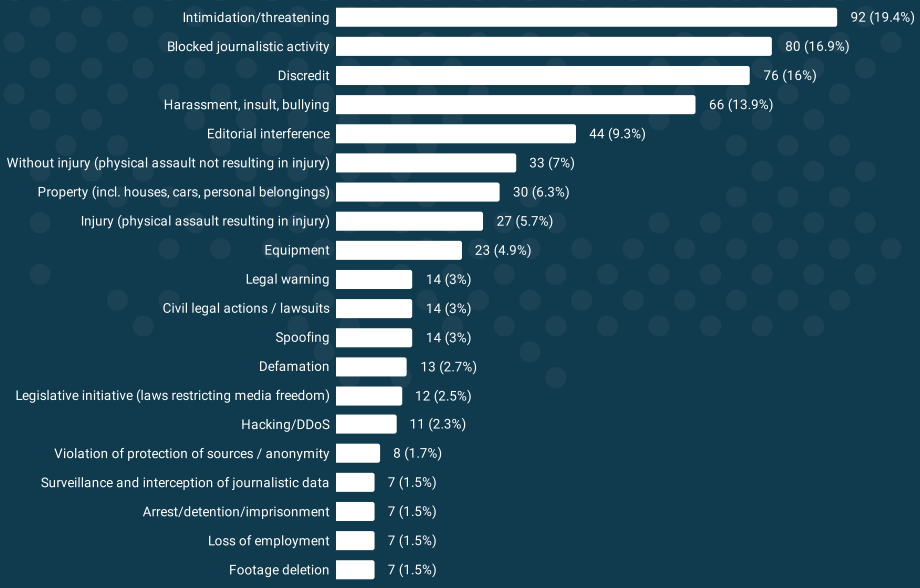
Online attacks again showed an increasing trend, covering a quarter of all incidents within the reporting period (24.1%, 114 alerts) and involving mainly online harassment, but also violations like spoofing or hacking. Attacks during protests remained high (15.2%, 72 alerts), and were followed by violations happening at the office or workplace (66 alerts), involving mainly editorial interference and vandalism by externals.

The following charts provide more statistical details on the number of recorded alerts regarding the different types of attacks, types of perpetrators (sources), as well as the type of environment (context) in the EU. The types of attacks are grouped into five main categories which are shown in the first chart, while the second chart offers statistics on all detailed categories. On some occasions, journalists and media workers were subjected to more than one type of violation by the same aggressor, such as a verbal and physical attack taking place at the same time. The charts show the number of alerts where a certain type of violation was present.

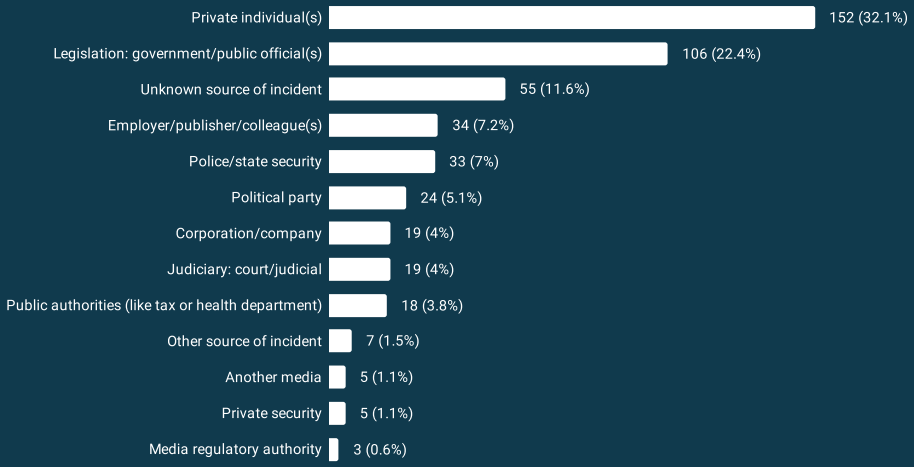
## Main types of attacks in EU Member States



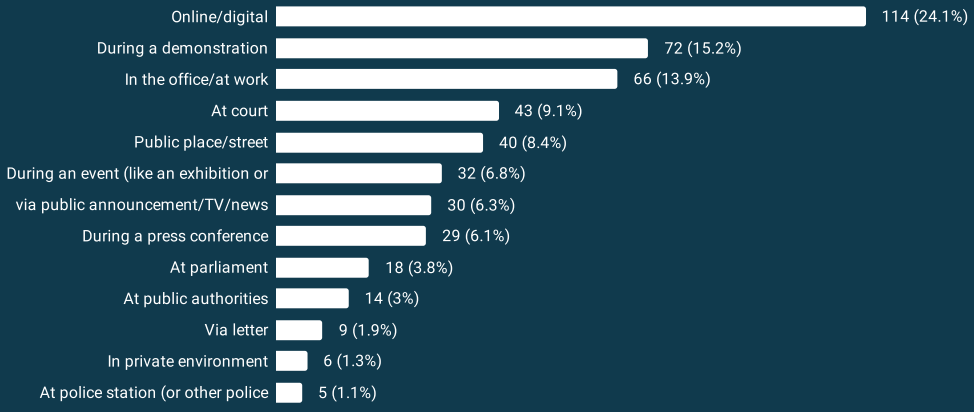

## Top 20 detailed types of attacks in EU Member States



## Sources of attacks in EU Member States




## Contexts of attacks in EU Member States




*Source: mappingmediafreedom.org*
*The data comprises documented Mapping Media Freedom alerts between 01/01/2024 and 30/06/2024 for European Union member states, based on the documentation status of 28/08/2024. 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*

In the eight candidate countries, MapMF documented 282 alerts impacting 464 persons or entities related to media within the reporting period. The number of recorded alerts were especially high for Turkey (76 alerts) and Ukraine (75).

Also for candidate countries, intimidation and threatening were the most frequent types of attack (15.6%, 44 alerts). All verbal attacks, including intimidation, threatening, discrediting, harassment, insult, and bullying, covered nearly one third of the incidents (86 alerts).

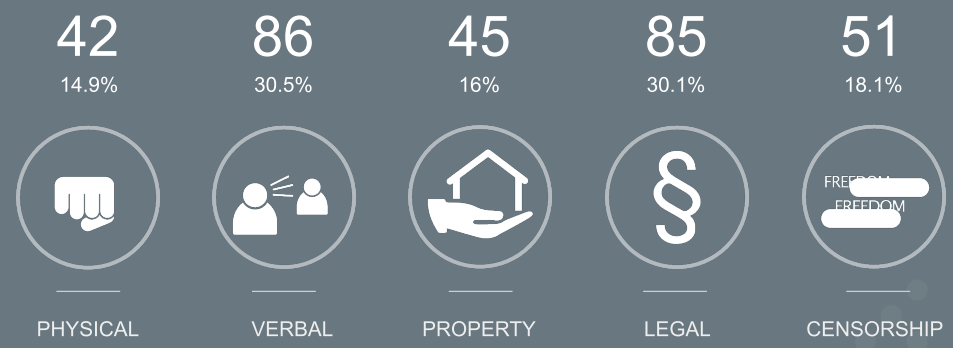
Contrary to the EU Member States, arrest, detention, or imprisonment was the second most frequent type of attack in candidate countries, with the most cases being recorded in Turkey. Generally, MapMF recorded a high number of legal incidents in candidate countries, covering nearly one third of all cases (30.1%, 85 alerts). Blocked journalistic activity was also a frequent issue, being the third most frequent type of attack with 37 alerts (13.1%).

The types of perpetrators were distributed differently in candidate countries than in the EU. The most frequent perpetrators remained unknown, covering mainly online violations in hacking and DDoS attacks, as well as online harassment. The second most frequent perpetrators were the judiciary, followed by police and state security. Private individuals ranked in fourth place.

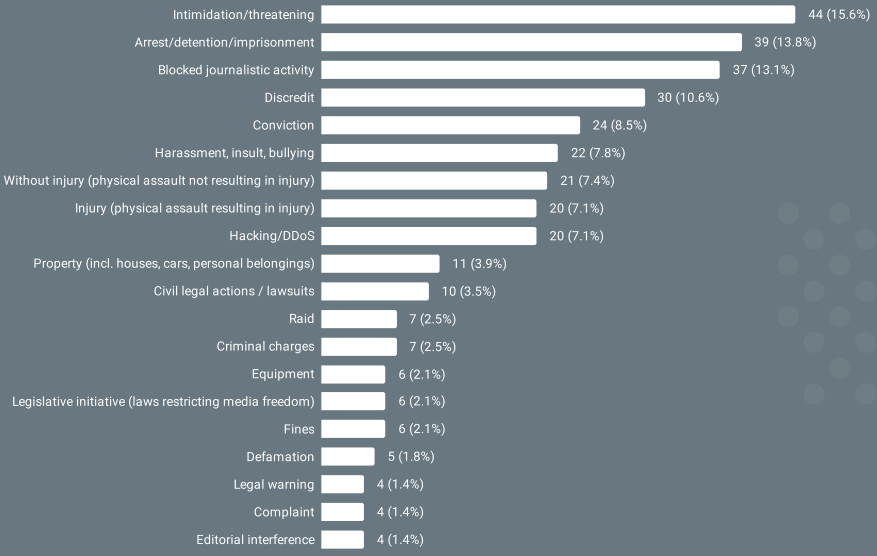
As in the EU Member States, online attacks were also the most frequent environment where press freedom violations took place in candidate countries, consisting mainly of online harassment, hacking, or DDoS attacks. The second most frequent environment was at court, with again the most incidents recorded in Turkey.

The following charts show more details on the number of alerts in candidate countries recorded for each category concerning types of attacks, sources, and contexts. Individual country issues are analysed in the country chapters or are retrievable through the Alert Explorer.

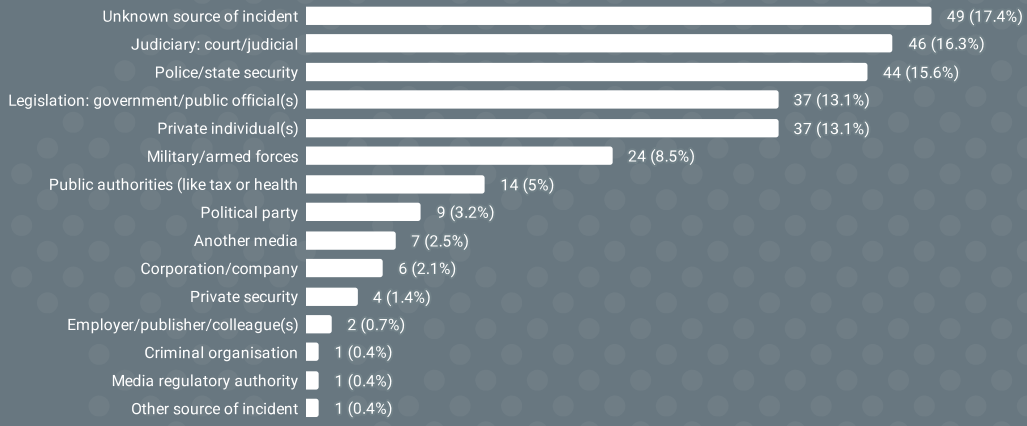
## Main types of attacks in candidate countries



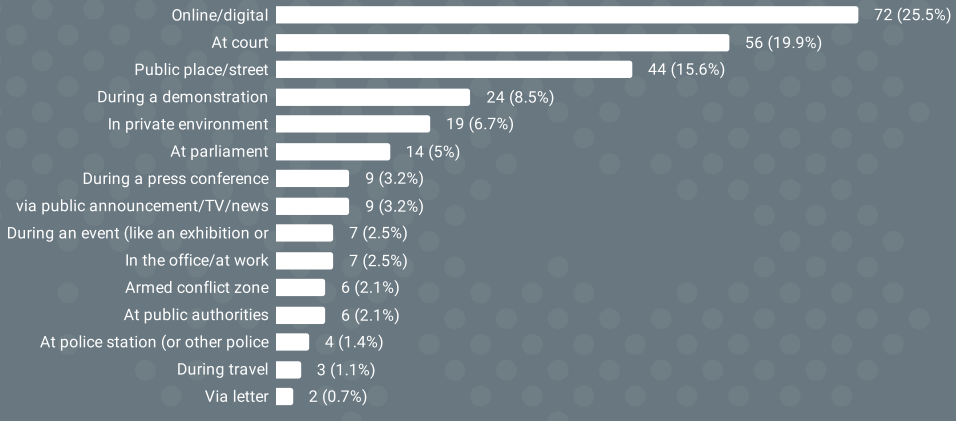

## Top 20 detailed types of attacks in candidate countries



## Sources of attacks in candidate countries




## Contexts of attacks in candidate countries




*Source: mappingmediafreedom.org*
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*Riot police use a water cannon during an opposition protest against "the Russian law" in Tbilisi, Georgia*
*.picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS | Zurab Tsertsvadze*

# ANTI-MEDIA LAWS

## *Legal initiatives threatening media freedom and freedom of expression*

Over the past six months, the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) documented 18 alarming cases involving the introduction of proposals or amendments of laws that threaten media freedom across EU Member States and candidate countries. Such legal measures were documented in Slovakia, Georgia, Italy, France, Moldova, Turkey, Albania, Croatia, Ukraine, Spain, and France.

Some of these legal measures include so-called "foreign agent" laws reminiscent of those in Russia and pieces of legislation undermining the independence and funding models of public service broadcasters. This chapter highlights the specific cases of both introduction and application of restrictive legal initiatives in Georgia, Slovakia, Albania, Italy, Lithuania, and Hungary, where recent legislative actions pose serious risks to independent journalism.

## *Foreign agent laws under the disguise of transparency and sovereignty protection*

In Georgia, within the last six months, press freedom rapidly deteriorated under the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party. On 3 April, the GD announced the reintroduction of a repressive

"foreign agent" bill under the title "Transparency of Foreign Influence", which passed in a first reading in 2023 but was subsequently withdrawn, following widespread protests and international criticism.

The new bill, which passed in three readings, faced harsh criticism from both local and international stakeholders, including the MFRR partner organisations. It was argued that the law would provide authorities with a powerful tool to discredit and curtail independent voices, thereby threatening press freedom and freedom of expression. According to the law, independent media and civil society organisations (CSOs) must label themselves as "organisations pursuing the interests of foreign powers." It additionally grants the Ministry of Justice extensive powers to investigate the foreign-funded organisations based on mere allegations of foreign ties. The Ministry can request personal information and interfere with the operations of independent media and civil society organisations. Moreover, amendments introduced during the third reading of the bill allow the issuing of monetary fines against organisations and individuals for failing to submit requested data, including personal and confidential information, despite earlier promises that the law would not affect individuals. The reintroduction of the foreign agent bill sparked widespread protests in Tbilisi and other cities in Georgia, continuing for over two months.

Similar to Georgia, Slovakia experienced a rapid erosion of press freedom in the first six months of 2024, which also included initiatives introducing a similar law. On 30 April 2024, Slovakia's parliament approved a bill in the first reading that would label civil society organisations receiving more than €5,000 annually in foreign funding as "organisations with foreign support." These civil society organisations would be required to disclose the identity and nationality of all donors, contributors, and creditors exceeding €5,000 in an annual report. Those with an annual income over €50,000 would have to submit a report to the Ministry of Interior, which could fine and dissolve civil society organisations without judicial process if they do not label themselves as "organisations with foreign support," and refuse to disclose the identity of donors and supporters.

The draft law, proposed by the far-right SNS party and supported by the leftist Smer party of Prime Minister Robert Fico and the centre-left Hlas of President Peter Pellegrini, faced severe criticism from opposition parties, and domestic and international human rights and press freedom advocates. The bill is currently in its second reading in the Bratislava legislature and, if passed, would become effective in January 2025.

In Hungary, the Sovereignty Protection Office opened an investigation into independent publisher Átlátszó based on the accusations made by the Civil Solidarity Foundation – Civil Solidarity Forum (CÖF-CÖKA), a Hungarian civil society organisation closely aligned with the ruling Fidesz party, related to the foreign funding of Átlátszó as well as several human rights organisations. This investigation was launched under the mandate of the Sovereignty Protection Act, which was passed by the Hungarian parliament in 2023 after just two weeks of debate and without proper public consultation. While media organisations were not ex-

plicitly mentioned, press freedom organisations, including the MFRR partner organisations, argued that the vague wording and broad scope of the law would allow for state-sponsored pressure on media outlets receiving foreign funding and those critical of the government. The investigations against Átlátszó underscore that the Sovereignty Protection Act poses a serious threat to what remains of independent media in Hungary, despite the text of the law not explicitly mentioning media outlets.

## Laws targeting Public Service Media

On 20 June, in Slovakia, the parliament passed a bill to dissolve public broadcaster RTVS and replace it with a politicised entity, STVR. Under the law, the public broadcaster's director Ľuboš Machaj will be replaced years before his term expires, and the position will be filled by the new board. Introduced in March, the bill was met with criticism from opposition parties, RTVS employees, and press freedom groups, for breaching the European Media Freedom Act. Critics warned that the bill would turn the public broadcaster into a government mouthpiece. The move followed the Smer party's previous attacks on the public broadcaster, which included budget cuts of 30%, promises to "go after" RTVS's director general, and declarations of intentions to impose control over RTVS.

In Lithuania, the consortium also documented worrying developments concerning the funding model of the public broadcaster. On 14 June, MP Mindaugas Lingė proposed an amendment to the Law on the Lithuanian National Radio and Television (LRT), threatening its funding model. Submitted without prior consultation, this change contradicts the European Media Freedom Act's requirement for transparency and objective criteria in funding. The proposed abolition of the minimum funding threshold jeopardises LRT's sustainability, independence, and ability to fulfil its mandate.

## Other legislative initiatives threatening press freedom

In Italy, on 11 April, Senator Gianni Berrino's proposed amendment sought to increase penalties for defamation, conflating it with fake news. The proposal faced backlash for contravening EU recommendations and Italian Constitutional Court decisions. Following protests, the amendment was withdrawn, but concerns remain about the ongoing "Balboni Bill" which increases fines for defamation without fully decriminalising it.

In Georgia, on 4 June, Speaker of Parliament Shalva Papuashvili introduced the "family values" bill, which bans "LGBT propaganda" in media, restricting depictions of same-sex relationships as well as public demonstrations advocating gender identity different from one's biological sex. This legislative package includes one main bill and 18 related draft laws, aiming to amend several legislative acts, including the civil code, labour code, and the law on general education. The bill drew criticism for potentially violating human rights and freedom of expression. On 27 June, the legislation passed the first reading at the Georgian Parliament.

*Smartphone user texting in a dark room.*
*Unsplash | Gilles Lambert*

# SPOOFING

MapMF considers spoofing attacks targeting journalists and media outlets as any form of impersonation or identity disguise pretending to be a certain media worker or media outlet by falsifying data with the intention or effect of deceiving or manipulating. Spoofing attacks documented on Mapping Media Freedom (MapMF) involve altered photo, voice, or video material including Artificial Intelligence (AI) generated deep fakes, cybersquatting, as well as spoofing websites and articles that pose to be created by legitimate news outlets or media workers. Spoofing attacks are often used to discredit journalists and media outlets, to spread disinformation, as well as to promote commercial products with fraudulent advertising.

In the first six months of 2024, MapMF already documented 17 spoofing cases, which are already twice as many as in the complete full year of 2023. Within these 17 attacks, 32 media professionals or media related organisations were targeted. While in 2023 most of the spoofing attacks comprised fake websites and articles, in 2024 most attacks involved AI generated deep fake content of altered images and/or voices of well-known journalists without their consent.

Deepfakes are part of a growing trend of disinformation aimed at destabilising public confidence and creating a climate of chaos.

## *Deepfake of journalists promoting deceptive advertising campaigns*

Denmark witnessed an unprecedented level of deepfakes resulting in the creation of fake stories and deepfakes of journalists promoting false advertising campaigns that mislead the public and lure them to fraudulent platforms. Since May, DR and TV 2 launched a joint campaign calling on the tech giant Meta to take responsibility for the deepfake content on its platforms (Instagram and Facebook), with a video shared on social media featuring the journalists. The campaign followed a series of unsuccessful attempts to get Meta to remove the fraudulent content, including an open letter to Meta signed by DR, BT, and TV 2. Among the journalists targeted was DR radio presenter Anders Lund Madsen, who appeared in 501 fake ads on Facebook feeds almost 670,000 times between 2 and 10 January. According to outlets Politiken and TjekDet, a total of 9,000 fraudulent ads featuring Madsen were created, including false reports of his death, directing users to fake investment platforms promising cryptocurrency profits. Despite being reported, more than 80% of the January ads remain on Facebook.

Similarly, in February, TV 2 presenter Divya Das was shown in fake articles by a spoof of the news portal BT on Instagram, leading users to fraudulent investment platforms. In April, deepfake images targeted Divya Das' husband, DR TV presenter Kim Bildsøe Lassen, showing Das allegedly being beaten by him. This led to another fake BT article luring readers into fraudulent investments. In March, a fake AI-generated video of TV Midtvest presenter Marc Killigren Akselsen circulated on Facebook, showing the journalist promoting a gambling application.

The spread of the deepfakes aimed at discrediting journalists was not limited to Denmark. In France, journalist Hanne Decoutere of Belgium's VRT was the victim of similar deepfakes promoting gambling apps. Fake articles of Le Monde misused the image of investigative journalist Élise Lucet to direct users to cryptocurrency resale platforms.

MaltaToday and Malta Independent also warned their readers about fraudulent websites that pose as legitimate news outlets and try to trick users with a get-rich-quick scheme. The fraudulent websites closely mimicked their design and branding, making them appear authentic to lure readers into a financial scam.

In Germany, the images and voices of ARD presenter Sandra Maischberger and Deutsche Welle journalist Tina Gerhäusser were used to promote health products alongside unreliable medical advice.

## *Spoofing attacks for Russian propaganda purposes*

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, MapMF recorded a total of five cases in Ukraine, Poland, and France related to spoofing used for propaganda purposes by Russian social media channels.

Ukrainian TV channel 1+1 reported that a fake video was circulating on Telegram, allegedly using 1+1's branding to spread pro-Russian disinformation. In May, pro-Russian social media groups circulated a fake video imitating news of Suspilne Kharkiv, reporting that an Orthodox priest from a pro-Ukrainian parish in the formerly Russian-occupied village of Tsyrkuny had embezzled funds entrusted to him for the church and spent the money on online gambling.

In Poland, a fake website of the Polish public broadcaster Polskie Radio was also reportedly created by pro-Russian sources.

In France, the international broadcaster France 24 was one of the most targeted outlets by Russian propaganda deepfakes, mainly to incite public disorder. In February, a deep fake video showed France 24 news reader Julien Fancuilli falsely claiming that French President Emmanuel Macron had postponed a trip to Ukraine because of fears of an assassination plot against him. Another fake video circulated alleging that La Voix du Nord, regional channel France 3, and BFMTV journalists were suspended for writing about bedbugs and investigated by France's General Directorate of Internal Security (DGSI).

Additionally in Germany, the deepfakes went beyond the screen: Tagesschau was directly discredited at an anti-government demonstration in Dresden, with three fake AI-generated audio files playing Tagesschau's false apologies for “lies” and “deliberate manipulation” in its reports for ARD, mainly on Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the protests.

## *Damaging journalists' reputations*

Unfortunately, deepfake pornography is a newly emerging concern, whereby AI is used to paste the faces of journalists onto the bodies of adult performers. In March, Dutch newspaper Algemeen Dagblad (AD) revealed that deepfake pornographic videos of dozens of famous Dutch people, including journalist Hélène Hendriks, were posted on pornography websites.

Spoofing attacks, including deepfakes aimed at damaging the reputation of a person, are not without consequences for the safety of the targeted journalist. In Serbia, Dinko Gruhonjić, journalist and Programme Director of the Independent Association of Journalists of Vojvodina (NDNV) was the target of a manipulated video. A deepfake of Gruhonjić's performance at last year's Dubrovnik Festival, in which he allegedly expressed his satisfaction at sharing a name with Ustasha criminal Dinko Šakić circulated on social media and was shared on numerous news portals. The montage, portraying Gruhonjić as a political opponent, trig-

gered two criminal complaints against him, a protest at the University of Novi Sad, where he lectures, and an unprecedented number of death threats fuelled by politicians in public debates. The use of the manipulative video in public discourse as a means of verbally abusing Gruhonjić is a prime example of a deepfake used to discredit and silence journalistic work.

Overall, the proliferation of spoofing misleads and threatens civil discourse by undermining trust in information and media professionals, whose credibility is damaged. The spoofing attacks recorded on the MapMF database have clearly shown that platforms such as Meta are not responding adequately to the fraudulent content that remains online. The MFRR partners support the thorough investigation of platforms by the European Commission for possible violations of the Digital Services Act (DSA). Article 16 of the DSA requires platforms to provide easy access and user-friendly mechanisms for effective notification of the presence of illegal content on their services so that platforms can take responsibility for it and ensure a safe digital environment free from disinformation and fraudulent content.

*European elections 2024 held in Barcelona, Spain.*
*picture alliance / NurPhoto | Albert Llop*

# ELECTIONS

## *The challenges of election reporting: Media and journalists under threat during campaign period*

During the first six months of the so-called 2024 super election year, nearly 20 EU Member States and candidate countries held local, regional, parliamentary, or presidential elections. In addition, the European Parliament election was held on 9 June.

During election periods, journalists and media outlets face various threats as politicians and parties escalate their campaigning. These threats include attempts to influence public perception through financial and editorial interference, or by silencing critical reporting with legal threats, public discrediting, and harassment campaigns. As political tensions rise, journalists covering demonstrations, polling stations, or sensitive election topics are at increased risk of physical and verbal abuse from both private citizens and authorities.

Regarding elections, a total of 67 alerts involving 161 media-related persons or entities were recorded on MapMF between January and June 2024. Verbal attacks (40.3%) and censorship (32.8%) were the most common types of incidents.

## *Verbal attacks against journalists during elections*

Journalists and news outlets were targeted with discrediting and harassment campaigns, usually by public officials, political parties, or private individuals, and also faced many serious cases of threats and intimidation. Nearly half (40.7%) of the verbal attacks occurred online, but some of them took place at demonstrations, press conferences, or other events.

MapMF recorded three cases of death threats against journalists in relation to elections. On several occasions, journalists and news outlets were targeted with large scale smear campaigns online.

## *Editorial interference as a tool to control elections reporting and influence voters*

MapMF recorded 12 cases of editorial interference related to elections. In Hungary, news outlets belonging to the pro-government publishing house Mediaworks circumvented election rules to promote ruling Fidesz party candidates ahead of the local and EP elections. The Romanian government and National Broadcasting Council were criticised for enabling broadcasting of electoral materials as editorial content.

An alarming example of editorial interference was revealed when in February the Romanian management of a group of local newspapers and news outlets, owned by the Hungarian Mediaworks publishing house, informed the editors-in-chief and marketing managers of the outlets that arrangements would be made with Romanian political parties to publish unmarked campaign articles.

In France and Spain, journalists denounced management pressures related to reporting during the election period. In April, legislative developments in Italy regarding the regulation of media coverage during the upcoming European elections raised significant concerns about media freedom and the impartiality of public broadcasting. Other forms of censorship in different EU Member States and candidate countries included access blockings and obstruction during election related events.

## *Physical attacks against journalists covering elections*

Journalists covering elections were also subjected to physical violence. In five out of the ten recorded cases, the perpetrators were police or state security officers.

After local elections, journalists in eastern Turkey faced physical attacks and obstruction by police while covering public protests against a decision by electoral authorities to block the newly elected mayor of Van, Abdullah Zeydan, from taking office. Several journalists covering the protests were also detained. During another incident, journalists from Anadolu Agency, Demirören News Agency, and İhlas News Agency were shot at by unknown perpe-

trators as they were covering a dispute at the local ballot box in the Sur district of Diyarbakır. There were no reported injuries as the journalists rapidly vacated the scene.

German journalist Steffen Schwarzkopf, chief reporter for the private broadcaster Welt TV, was physically assaulted and injured by a man in Erfurt during a live broadcast outside the Thuringian parliament. In Serbia, Marko Miletić, editor-in-chief of the Mašina news portal, was physically assaulted by activists of the Serbian Progressive Party at the polling station in Zemun Polje, Belgrade. He arrived on-site to investigate electoral votes, after receiving information that some "malpractices" were taking place at the polling station.

In France, MapMF recorded three xenophobic attacks related to the European and French legislative elections, marked by the rise of far-right parties. The hostility escalated when two women journalists were physically assaulted and sexually harassed by far-right party Rassemblement National (RN) supporters at a campaign meeting held by Jordan Bardella.

## *Other forms of election related violations threatening press freedom*

Other election-related press freedom violations recorded on MapMF included three Distributed Denial-of-Service (DDoS) attacks. In Romania, the interim director of the National Library of Romania (BNaR) Adrian Cioroianu targeted investigative journalist Emilia Șercan on social media and exposed that she had been researching the doctoral thesis of politician Mircea Geoană, who is running as a presidential candidate in the upcoming elections.

In Hungary, the Sovereignty Protection Office opened an investigation into investigative outlet Átlátszó as it "investigates organisations that use foreign funding to influence the will of voters or support such activities" under the mandate of the law on the protection of national sovereignty adopted by the Hungarian Parliament last year. Additionally, József Tóth-Szántai, the Fidesz-KDNP candidate for mayor of Miskolc, tried to prevent the publication of an interview he had given to news outlet Borsod24, threatening legal action and HUF 2 million (€5,118) in damages.

Journalism plays a crucial role in democracies during elections, and independent reporting on politicians, policies, societal issues, and political parties is essential to ensure the right of citizens to freely choose elected representatives. Press freedom, journalists' safety, editorial independence, as well as rules on political spending and communications are the cornerstones of free and fair elections.

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# COUNTRY REPORTS

This chapter provides insights into the state of media freedom in six selected EU Member States and four candidate countries, sorted alphabetically. These countries were selected based on recent, worrying developments which are not necessarily reflected in the number of alerts recorded.

It is important to highlight that the alert numbers alone cannot be interpreted as equating the severity of press freedom in any given country. This is mainly due to different population sizes and the varied nature of violations. The different reporting situation can also influence the number of recorded alerts, and some attacks might not be reported because of fear of retaliation or due to different conceptions of what constitutes a media freedom violation. Furthermore, not all systemic and structural issues can be measured by MapMF. Even if fewer alerts were recorded in comparison to the previous year in a given country, systemic issues may still persist.

As a result, the state of media freedom in various countries cannot be compared based on the number of alerts recorded alone, and alert numbers should not be interpreted as a ranking of countries. Furthermore, countries which are not analysed in this report do not necessarily perform better compared to analysed countries or compared to their performance in previous years.

Nevertheless, the recorded violations do provide insights into the state of media freedom in individual countries. To interpret the situation, the following country chapters provide quantitative and qualitative analysis considering the types of attacks, the actors involved in these, and the contexts in which they were committed, combined with insights into the overall political situation in the country affecting media freedom.

## *EU Member States*

### *Croatia*

In the first six months of 2024, MapMF recorded 12 alerts involving 15 persons or entities related to media. The state of press freedom in Croatia became particularly concerning given that, out of the seven verbal attacks monitored, five were committed by representatives of the government or public officials.

Prime Minister Andrej Plenković discredited journalists in public debates for their critical coverage of him and his party. In April, the daily Nacional published a recording of an internal meeting of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) in which Prime Minister Andrej Plenk-

ović can be heard accusing news outlets such as N1, Telegram, and Nacional of being part of a conspiracy against him and the party. Following Jutarnji's article disclosing confidential WhatsApp correspondence between Judge Ivan Turudić and former State Secretary Josipa Rimac revealing frequent meetings and mutual favours, Plenković accused Jutarnji of "corruption" and "malicious reporting". The discrediting comments are not new. In January, Plenković verbally abused an N1 journalist at a press conference to avoid answering her questions.

Another major concern is the attacks on the media by the far-right Homeland Movement. In June, Homeland Movement politician Stephen Nikola Bartulica accused journalist Andrej Dimitrijević of "media abuse" and "intimidation" for allegedly taking unauthorised photos of his car, in which his children could be seen, as part of an investigation into Bartulica's unregistered properties. In May, the leader of the party, Ivan Penava, said that his party would only support a new coalition government led by the conservative Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) Prime Minister Andrej Plenković if it cut funding for the weekly Novosti. Penava expressed deep disagreement with the editorial policy of Novosti, which is known for its critical publications on the state. Novosti was targeted with threatening messages following this incident.

Three online threats have been recorded within the reporting period. In March, fact-checker Faktograf and Climate Portal were subjected to a large-scale smear campaign initiated by Opposition MP Mario Nakić. In an article published on the blog of alternative media Liberal.hr, Nakić alleged that Climate Portal was financed by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and called on readers to punish the ruling coalition party in the parliamentary elections for financing the portal. The MP also discredited the portal on his X account with similar comments. In May, the editorial team at Nacional received a bomb threat via text message, referring to Pukanic, the owner of the Croatian weekly Nacional, and his close associate Niko Franjić, who were murdered in a car bomb attack in Zagreb in October 2008.

Recent legislative amendments (referred to as "Lex AP") to the Criminal Code remain a further challenge to press freedom, including Article 307a which introduced a prison sentence of up to three years for the disclosure of "non-public" information about investigative measures or evidence in criminal proceedings. Although the controversial article does not directly concern journalists, it offers little protection to whistleblowers. It could also open up the possibility for police or prosecutors to investigate and put pressure to reveal confidential journalistic sources, which could include the seizure of journalistic equipment.

The changes to the criminal code came at a critical time for journalists, who are under constant legal pressure. Persistent threats and attacks on media professionals by politicians and public officials exacerbate the risk to journalists who already face challenging circumstances in a difficult environment for media freedom in Croatia. In response to the documented challenges to media freedom, with journalists frequently at risk, the MFRR scheduled an international fact-finding mission to Croatia in September 2024.

## *France*

MapMF recorded 57 alerts involving 85 persons or entities related to the media in the first half of 2024 in France.

The most common type of attack in France was verbal abuse, covering more than half of all recorded incidents (52.6%). MapMF recorded 30 incidents of verbal abuse in the first 6 months of 2024, which is already nearly as many as were recorded for the whole year of 2023 (32 incidents). The main aggressors of verbal attacks against media workers were private individuals covering more than half of the incidents (53.3%). Most of the verbal attacks took place online (52.3%, 16 incidents).

The sharp rise of recorded online harassment, cyber bullying, and online threatening faced by media workers is a major concern. The 16 incidents recorded in the first six months of 2024 are already more than were recorded for the whole year of 2023 in France. Nassira El Moaddem, who works for the independent website Arrêt sur Images, faced cyberbullying in June with hundreds of messages on X. This followed racist comments against her by Julien Odoul, an MP for the RN party, on CNews. The online harassment escalated and Arrêt sur Images was also threatened. Among other things, the newsroom received an email threatening another "Charlie", referring to the 2015 terrorist attack on the Charlie Hebdo newsroom. The online attacks escalated beyond the screen with a racist and threatening letter to El Moaddem's family home.

In June, the journalist Thomas Dietrich received threats of physical violence, including pictures of an assault he suffered in 2011, days before the publication of an article on funding networks involving the RN and President Emmanuel Macron in the Central African Republic. The messages were sent on the Whatsapp instant messaging network via international numbers.

Journalists in France faced an alarming number of xenophobic attacks during the monitoring period both online and offline. France 5 journalist Mohamed Bouhafsi was subjected to racist messages on his social media and Karim Rissouli received a racist letter at his home similar to that of El Moaddem.

Censorship was the second most frequent type of attack in France with 12 cases recorded in the first 6 months of 2024 compared to 11 cases recorded in the full year of 2023. In March, the regional daily La Provence suspended its editor-in-chief, Aurélien Viers, over a front-page headline critical of President Macron's visit to Marseille. Viers was reinstated after his colleagues went on strike. The Radio France group also dismissed two of its journalists, including Jean-François Achili, who was allegedly accused of collaborating with the Rassemblement Nacional Bardella, and Guillaume Meurice, following comments about Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In June, journalists from France 3 SDJ union were banned from covering the legislative elections by their director. They signed an article

against the far-right Rassemblement National (RN)'s threat to press freedom and this was deemed "incompatible" with media impartiality.

Given the number of instances of censorship, Parliament's approval of the draft reform planning the merger of public service broadcasters France Télévisions, Radio France, and the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA) from 1 January 2026 sparked strong criticism online.

The growing influence of media tycoons, such as Vincent Bolloré controlling the mass-media holding company Vivendi Group, fuels media freedom concerns. Following comments made by former Canal Plus editor-in-chief Jean-Baptiste Rivoire in a Reporters Without Borders (RSF) documentary criticising Bolloré's channel management, Rivoire was subjected to legal proceedings. In June, RSF was the target of a disinformation campaign ranging from cyber-attacks to smear campaigns. While it was operated by the French communications agency Progressif Media, Vivendi Group orchestrated it to silence the press and media freedom organisation and promote Bolloré's CNews television channel.

Vandalism cases targeting media premises also serve as evidence of the increase in hostility towards journalists. The weekly Le Poher in the Breton town of Carhaix, along with Le Télégramme and Ouest-France, were the most vandalised outlets. Between May and June, a total of at least 3 attacks were carried out by an identified far-right extremist who left discrediting stickers, including a death threat. In June, the newsroom of Channel 21's "L'Equipe" was also attacked a few days after its journalist Olivier Ménard was assaulted at his residence.

The issue of police violence against journalists covering protests remains a concern. In four out of six cases of assault on journalists at demonstrations, the perpetrators were members of the police force. The journalists were injured in half of the cases. Investigative journalists also faced pressure to hand over sources. In June, a Blast journalist was arbitrarily arrested for 32 hours. She refused to reveal her confidential sources about her investigation into French arms sales to Israel. She was finally released and proceedings were dismissed.

The incidents recorded since January have highlighted the need for enhanced safety measures for journalists, particularly the importance of prompt investigations into digital threats. Legislators must also review the rules and thresholds for media concentration and reinforce the independence of editorial staff and newsrooms to combat censorship of public interest journalism.

## *Germany*

MapMF recorded 72 alerts in Germany, involving 116 persons or entities related to media in Germany

In the first six months of the year, the country witnessed a new form of protest whereby farmers blocked access to media premises to obstruct the distribution of newspapers. In February, at least three printing sites and five newspapers were blocked by hundreds of demonstrators. As a result, the delivery of several newspapers was impacted. The demonstration at the Axel Springer publishing house lasted for hours and even prevented the delivery of the Hamburger Abendblatt, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), and the Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ).

The media buildings were also the target of acts of vandalism, which appear to be intended as a form of intimidation. Among the four attacks on media property, the Eichsfelder Tageblatt in Duderstadt was vandalised twice with swastikas

With 36 alerts, the number of attacks on journalists covering protests were again on a high level, accounting for 50% of all attacks recorded on the database and with nearly all of them being conducted by private individuals (91.7%). The attacks ranged from covering up or damaging cameras, harassment of the press, threats, and physical violence.

Of the 16 incidents during protests involving physical assault, eight led to injuries, including freelancer Kili Weber who was injured twice. In January, Weber was attacked by Querdenken activists, and again in April in Freiberg during a far-right demonstration. Steffen Schwarzkopf, Welt TV's chief reporter, was hit on the back of the head and the ear during a live broadcast on Thuringia's elections. Bild journalist Iman Sefati was also beaten and threatened with a knife at a Berlin pro-Palestinian demonstration.

The violence against journalists reached a worrisome level in May when Berliner Zeitung video journalist Ignacio Rosasland was attacked by a Berlin police officer while filming police evacuation of pro-Palestinian activists from Humboldt University. Rosaslanda, who identified himself as a member of the press, was punched in the face and tackled to the ground while filming, before being handcuffed and detained in the building for hours without medical attention. The MFRR urged authorities not to let the police violence go unpunished and to increase protection for journalists, especially photographers who are more vulnerable to assaults due to their visibility. In a pro-Israel rally, a camera operator was pressured to show his press card by a demonstrator of the counter-protest, who then pushed him. A freelance photographer suffered acoustic trauma after being assaulted by a protester in Berlin in June.

In January, Correctiv's investigative report, "Secret Plan Against Germany", reported on a meeting in Potsdam, Germany, initiated by far-right activist Gernot Mörig. Participants of the meeting involved high-ranking politicians of Germany's far-right party Alternative für

Deutschland (AfD), right-wing extremists, representatives of the new conservative party Werteunion, Christian Democratic Union (CDU) members, and business people.

At the meeting, far-right activist Martin Sellner, leading figure of the Identitarian Movement, presented the far-right and identitarian political concept of forced repatriation of non-European foreigners to their 'home countries'. The revealed content of this meeting sparked massive public reaction and led to numerous demonstrations across Germany. Following its publication, Correctiv faced several attacks.

AfD MP Gerrit Huy filed a criminal complaint, which was dismissed by the public prosecutor's office in Postdam. Other AfD-related incidents involved discrediting, online harassment and threatening, and Correctiv's editorial address being published by AfD deputy leader Beatrix von Storch. The AfD also submitted a motion in the Parliament urging the State to take legal action against the television Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg (RBB) following its reporting on Correctiv's revelations.

Furthermore, Correctiv was also threatened on the phone by an unknown source after the publication, and faced two civil lawsuits, one filed by entrepreneur Klaus Nordmann, identified by Correctiv as a major AfD donor, the other by constitutional lawyer and CDU member Ulrich Vosgerau who was also active as a legal representative of AfD members in the past. The two plaintiffs were represented by the same lawyer. Nordmann's claim was dismissed by the Hamburg Higher Regional Court, while Vosgeau's claim was partially dismissed by the same court.

The rise and normalisation of far-right ideology is a major concern for the media in Germany. The AfD, the country's largest and most successful far-right party, has experienced significant growth and has made inroads at all political levels. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Verfassungsschutz) has classified the entire party as a suspected right-wing extremist organisation, with some of its state associations classified as having a definite right-wing extremist agenda. MapMF recorded several incidents against journalists and media performed by AfD.

Besides the incidents mentioned already above, in March, AfD chairperson Katrin Ebner-Steiner informed Bavarian radio that the party would no longer collaborate with a journalist from Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR24) reporting on the AfD party for the past five years. This was due to the journalist being accused of insulting an AfD party member, of which there was no evidence. In June, Ann-Katrin Müller, an Axel Springer journalist, reported that she had been refused accreditation to cover the AfD party conference in Essen after publishing a critical article. In the same week, all photographers and camera crews were initially prevented from attending the trial of AfD Björn Höcke at the Halle Regional Court.

Overall, the cases of blocked journalistic activity were on a significantly increasing trend covering 34.7% of all incidents (25 alerts) in the first 6 months of 2024, compared to 8 alerts

in the full year of 2023 (6.7%). Most of these cases comprised journalists being blocked from accessing reporting locations or being obstructed while on assignment. MapMF recognised malicious intimidation practices aimed at silencing critical voices. The German government must urgently transpose the EU anti-SLAPP directive without delay and include provisions for domestic cases to strengthen the protection of investigative journalists.

## *Hungary*

In the run-up to the local and European elections, the already suffocated media landscape in Hungary faced pressure not only from Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his ruling Fidesz party and their supporters, but also from opposition politicians. Government and public officials were the most common (27.7%) perpetrators of press freedom violations. In total, MapMF recorded 47 press freedom violations in Hungary affecting 147 media-related persons or entities within the monitoring period.

Nearly half (48.9%) of the recorded cases were related to censorship. Media outlets critical of the Fidesz government were denied access to press conferences and other events, and struggled to receive responses to their questions or interview requests. Previous assessments have described the Hungarian government's discriminatory approach to journalists' questions as illegal and in violation of press freedom laws.

The newly established and widely criticised Sovereignty Protection Office launched its first investigation against independent news outlet Átlátszó and civil society organisation Transparency International Hungary Foundation. The authority stated it "investigates organisations that use foreign funding to influence the will of voters or support such activities" under the mandate of the law on the protection of national sovereignty adopted by the Hungarian Parliament last year.

MapMF recorded a total of five waves of DDoS attacks against the websites of eight different news outlets in Hungary, some of them attacked more than once. Although the number of incidents was still fewer than the large-scale DDoS attacks in 2023, the issue remains a grave concern for press freedom in Hungary. The perpetrator behind the numerous DDoS attacks against Hungarian media in 2023 labelled themselves as 'Hano' in server logs left behind during the attacks. The DDoS attacks, which hindered editorial work and caused severe financial damage to nearly 50 Hungarian media outlets, ceased for a few months at the end of 2023, but in January 2024, MapMF recorded two new attacks, which indicated that 'Hano' had continued their operation.

In relation to local and European Parliament elections, MapMF recorded two DDoS attacks targeting Hungarian media. In total, 14 election-related alerts were documented during the monitoring period, and the cases of editorial interference were especially alarming. Several publicly funded local newspapers or news outlets belonging to the pro-government pub-

lishing house Mediaworks were criticised for circumventing election rules to promote ruling Fidesz party candidates.

Media were regularly targeted with legal threats, such as lawsuits and legal warnings. In an unprecedented move, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán filed civil lawsuits against several news outlets in relation to their reporting on critical statements made by Hans Reisch, CEO of the Spar Austria Group. Journalists and news outlets were also often targeted with discrediting comments and harassment campaigns, most often by public officials, pro-government media, and other Fidesz allies.

## *Italy*

The marked deterioration of press freedom in Italy escalated further during the monitoring period, as MapMF recorded a total of 96 violations involving 125 media-related persons or entities. Under the right-wing government led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and her party Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), the number of verbal attacks, censorship attempts, and legal proceedings by politicians and political parties against journalists and news outlets critical of the government continued increasing.

Concerns about the editorial independence of public broadcaster RAI materialised with 11 documented cases of editorial interference, sparking criticism and raising fears of it becoming a government mouthpiece. Ahead of the European elections in June 2024, changes to the 'par condicio' provision were implemented to favour ruling parties, increasing worries about political propaganda on public broadcasts. Notable censorship cases included the cancellation of Antonio Scurati's antifascist monologue in April and a disciplinary case against Serena Bortone, host of the show during which the speech was to air.

The potential sale of leading news agency AGI to Antonio Angelucci, a ruling coalition's Lega politician, raised concerns. Journalists protested, fearing the sale to a right-wing MP could jeopardise their editorial independence. Additionally, editors-in-chief of Il Messaggero, L'Espresso and La Svolta were dismissed from their positions within a week, sparking concerns of political pressure and editorial interference. These cases highlight the complex and problematic nature of media ownership in Italy, where politicians are often also entrepreneurs and media owners, making media ownership as a core business rare and resulting in conflicts of interest and potentially compromised journalistic integrity.

Private individuals were the primary source of press freedom violations in the country, constituting a third (33.3%) of the documented cases. In addition to verbal harassment and attacks to property, journalists were also subjected to physical violence by private individuals. MapMF recorded four alarming cases of serious physical violence, in which media professionals were injured by private individuals while on assignment. Across the country, editorial offices of news outlets were vandalised by anti-vaxxers.

The Italian government introduced controversial reforms affecting press freedom. Federico Mollicone, an FdI deputy and Culture Committee Chairperson, proposed a reform for "verified news" to counter fake news. Journalist associations, opposition parties, and media criticised the bill, citing threats to press freedom and media pluralism. In May, the Italian Chamber of Deputies approved a cybersecurity draft law. A motion by Enrico Costa of Azione was approved, extending investigative secrecy, regulating trojan spyware in public administration corruption cases, and allowing Ministry of Justice inspectors database access checks. Penalties for unauthorised database access were also doubled. Additionally, FdI Senator Gianni Berrino's amendment to the already controversial Balboni bill aimed to increase defamation penalties, with possible jail terms up to 4.5 years and fines up to €120,000 for journalists.

Legal threats were often used by public officials in attempts to silence independent and critical journalism. MapMF recorded an alarming number of vexatious lawsuits, with criminal and civil defamation lawsuits regularly exploited against journalists and news outlets, especially by politicians, political parties, and public authorities. Pre- and post-publication legal warnings were often used by politicians of the ruling parties. One of the prominent legal cases against journalists happened in March, when the Perugia Public Prosecutor's Office initiated a preliminary investigation against three Domani journalists for alleged breaching of secrets, based on a complaint filed by Minister of Defence, Guido Crosetto.

Public officials also often verbally attacked media professionals critical of the government. These incidents included PM Meloni's public attack on Carlo De Benedetti, owner of the newspaper Domani, in response to the Perugia investigation based on Minister Crosetto's complaint. Similarly, the PM publicly condemned the Fanpage investigative team who had exposed the fascist, racist, and antisemitic statements of members of the youth wing of leading coalition party FdI.

## *Slovakia*

Since the populist Prime Minister Robert Fico and his coalition government returned to power in late 2023, independent Slovak media has been under growing pressure and threats. The state of press freedom in the country deteriorated rapidly, especially after the assassination attempt on Fico in early May.

In the first six months of 2024, MapMF recorded a total of 28 press freedom violations targeting 43 media-related persons or entities. Government and public officials were the most common (67.9%) source of violations documented on MapMF, of which most were related to verbal attacks like discrediting, intimidation, and harassment. The officials also refused to communicate with independent news outlets, instead preferring social media and disinformation platforms.

The most alarming developments in Slovakia involved several anti-media laws proposed or passed by the government. Slovakia's parliament approved a bill labelling civil society organisations receiving over €5,000 annually in foreign funding as 'foreign-supported'. In May, amendments to media and access-to-information laws were proposed, introducing a "right to a correction" and allowing officials to charge for extensive information requests. The most worrying development occurred in June when parliament passed a bill to dissolve public broadcaster RTVS, replacing it with a government-controlled entity, STVR. Critics denounced this as an attack on press freedom, conflicting with the European Media Freedom Act.

In April, two prosecutors overseeing the murder case of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová resigned due to the abolition of the special prosecutor's office. Despite assurances from the Minister of Justice Boris Susko, press freedom advocates expressed concerns as Kuciak's case was the first one to be affected and the new prosecutor will have to familiarise themselves with thousands of case file pages.

Most of the violations in the country (67.9%) were related to verbal attacks. Journalists and newsrooms faced continuous discrediting and smear campaigns, mainly from government officials, but also private individuals. Politicians repeatedly blamed independent media for the attack on PM Fico, claiming that critical stories about Fico's government were the reason for the assassination attempt.

Throughout the monitoring period, high-ranking government officials instigated and fuelled serious, large-scale harassment and discrediting campaigns against journalists and news outlets, accusing them of "biassed reporting on COVID-19", "anti-Russian warmongering", "distorting information", and "misleading the public", among other things. In the aftermath of the assassination attempt, several Slovak news outlets were threatened with arson attacks online.

Slovak journalists were also doxxed online in the reporting period. In February, far-right conspiracist Daniel Bombic, or 'Danny Kollár', posted Daily SMER journalist Zuzana Kovačič Hanzelová's phone number on his Telegram channel. This followed a post by Ľuboš Blaha, Deputy Speaker of Parliament and Smer party Vice Chair, who attacked Kovačič Hanzelová with personal insults, accusations of bias, and fabricated rumours about her sex life. In April, Aktualíty journalist Matej Príbelský was harassed after Slovak rapper and influencer Rytmus shared his phone number on Instagram.

# Candidate Countries

## Albania

The MFRR recorded 22 alerts involving 24 persons or entities related to the media, and three legal decisions posing chilling effects on press and media freedom in Albania in the first six months of 2024.

Verbal attacks were the main threat to journalists and media entities in Albania. Since January, Prime Minister Edi Rama repeatedly used derogatory language against Albanian journalists. In March, Rama went further by making inappropriate physical contact with journalist Ambrozia Meta, in an attempt to avoid answering questions that were not favourable for him. The Prime Minister's discrediting behaviour reflects a continuing trend among politicians to publicly discredit independent journalists and news outlets and to distract attention from matters of public interest.

In January, News24 TV journalist Klodiana Lala was accused of being a "spokesperson for his political opponents" by former Prime Minister Berisha in an interview in front of the Special Court for Corruption and Organised Crime (SPAK), which was investigating him for "passive corruption" in connection with the "Partizani" affair. In May, Silvi Bardhi, spokesperson for the National Council of the Democratic Party, said during a press conference in Tirana that newsreader Arber Hitaj, head of the Albanian section of the Association of European Journalists (AEJ), is corrupt and influenced by the government. Hitaj was verbally abused in response to AEJ Albania's coverage of media workers being physically threatened with Molotov cocktails while covering a demonstration against Tirana Mayor Erion Veliaj in front of City Hall. Among other things, Erion Veliaj is allegedly involved in public waste disposal via incinerators, according to research from the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN).

The journalists reporting on the mayor and municipality of Tirana have been subjected to intimidation. In March, investigative journalist Ola Xama was the subject of a smear campaign led by the Prapaskena news portal and the Dita newspaper, including the publication of her confidential data, putting her safety at risk.

There was a notable increase in documented instances of blocked journalistic activity, with six attacks monitored in the first 6 months of 2024 compared to four for the entire year of 2023.

The use of the pretext of violation of community standards without clear justification became an increasingly common tool to shut down critical platforms. Often, those engaged in investigative work were targeted. In April, independent media Citizens Channel, reported that it was unable to publish critical news on Facebook, with posts systemically flagged as spam or being against the rules. The outlet was threatened with closure due to the risk of being reported as a fake page as thousands of fake accounts followed its Instagram page.

In June, the investigative online portal Media Look, a platform dedicated to the analysis of media practices, was temporarily suspended by Facebook.

Journalists faced an increasingly hostile environment, with state security impeding access to transparent information of public interest. In May, journalists were repeatedly prevented by guards from covering parliamentary sessions. Ora News journalist and Chairperson of the Association of Journalists of Albania (AJA), Isa Myzyraj, who was also threatened with death, saw his camera operator escorted out while EuroNews Albania journalist Ardit Hoxha was pushed away by a guard. In June, journalists were also unable to observe and report on the elections of rectors and deans at public universities in Albania, prompting new concerns over obstruction of the press.

In February, the Albanian Supreme Court set a dangerous precedent for all journalists when it ruled on the legality of the seizure of journalist Elton Qyno's equipment by SPAK, following his refusal to reveal sources in connection with the publication of confidential documents from a high-profile investigation. Given the existing difficulties for journalists to carry out their work, such a decision introduces an ambiguous framework for the standards established by the European Court of Human Rights and other international entities dedicated to press and media freedom which prosecutors must follow when seeking sources from professional journalists, raising questions about the extent to which journalists' rights are protected.

## *Georgia*

In the first half of 2024, the state of press freedom in Georgia, which became an EU candidate country in November 2023, was under serious threat. The situation became acutely visible following the reintroduction of the restrictive foreign agent law under the title 'Transparency of Foreign Influence'. On 28 May 2024, the Parliament of Georgia overturned the Presidential veto on the law and adopted it. The law threatens the existence of independent media and civil society in the country with a highly polarised media and political environment.

Within this reporting period, MapMF documented 38 press freedom violations involving 65 persons or entities related to media. The cases included physical assaults on journalists (26.3%), attacks on property (13.2%), verbal attacks (21.1%), legal incidents (23.7%), and censorship (26.3%). It is important to note that nearly one third of incidents (31.6%) were perpetrated by government and public officials, while in 34.2% of the incidents police and state security forces were sources of violation.

On 20 February 2024, Chairperson of the Parliament of Georgia Shalva Papuashvili publicly discredited Gela Mtivlishvili, editor of the investigative media organisation Mtis Ambebi, by questioning his credentials as a journalist in relation to his coverage of a landslide in the village of Shovi in which 33 people were killed. Papuashvili's comments, which MFRR partners

denounced, came amid a broader wave of verbal attacks against independent media led by figures like Papuashvili, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, and Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze, as well as Members of the Parliament of Georgia.

Prime Minister Kobakhidze discredited fact-checking organisations FactCheck and Myth Detector on 8 April, accusing them of censorship following Meta's designation of some posts published by Kobakhidze's Georgian Dream party as "fake information". On 2 May, Tbilisi Mayor Kaladze insulted Formula TV reporter Nutsa Bakhutashvili after she asked him a question about the use of rubber bullets against protesters at one of the rallies against the foreign agent law. The next day, Kaladze congratulated journalists on World Press Freedom Day and stated that if journalists offended him, he would retaliate. He condemned violence against journalists and protesters calling it unacceptable but blamed "certain TV channels", the President, and "Western-funded radical groups" for inciting violence in Georgia.

In early May, hundreds of journalists, activists, and public figures, who opposed the recently introduced foreign agent law, received threatening and insulting calls, which included threats of severe physical violence. Natia Kuprashvili, director of the Journalism Resource Center, reported receiving multiple calls from phone numbers registered in Chad, Ukraine, and Georgia. The callers used offensive language, revealed her apartment address, and threatened her with retaliation for her opposition to the foreign agent law.

Shortly after, cars and offices of several journalists and media outlets, including Nino Zuriashvili of Studio Monitori and Gela Mtivlishvili of Mtis Ambebi, were vandalised. Unidentified individuals hung dozens of printed posters with insulting content on them. Vandalism continued on 30 May, targeting offices of newsrooms and civil society organisations including Mtis Ambebi, Myth Detector, and the Media Development Foundation (MDF). By the time of the publication of this report, cases of vandalism, threats, and intimidation against journalists and government critics had still not been investigated.

During the large-scale demonstrations calling for the withdrawal of the foreign agent law, journalists were faced with police violence despite being identified as members of the press.

At one of the massive demonstrations which started on 16 April, reporters from online media including Aleksandre Keshelashvili of Publika, Giorgi Badridze of Tabula, and Giorgi Baskhajauri of Aprili Media were chased and physically and verbally assaulted by riot police officers. In addition, independent Azerbaijani journalist Nurlan Gahramanli was physically assaulted and injured by riot police. This violence continued unabated at the rally taking place on 30 April, when eight journalists and media workers were subjected to police violence during a protest rally against the foreign agent law. On 3 May, Giorgi Badridze, a junior editor at Tabula, was detained while filming police arresting protesters against the foreign agent law. Released later that day, Badridze was obstructed by police despite showing his journalist credentials.

Access to parliament was restricted in April for journalists representing online media while the Parliament bureau was examining the official registration of the draft law on "Transparency of Foreign Influence". Since then, journalists from online media outlets, as well as several journalists from government-critical TV channels, were barred from entering the parliament multiple times.

MFRR partners condemned the barring of journalists from reporting within the Parliament of Georgia and urged the Parliament to reinstate the accreditation of all journalists, including members of online media.

## *Serbia*

The MFRR recorded 38 alerts involving 51 media-related persons or entities during the first half of 2024. The state of press freedom in Serbia is alarming, with verbal abuse making up the majority (63.2%) of recorded incidents.

Since January, the press has faced a high number of online threats. Nearly one third of the violations (34.2%) reported in the country took place online. Between January and April, journalists from N1, CNN International's local broadcast partner, reported four cases of online harassment, all of them including death threats. Journalists working for the regional news portal Južne Vesti were also threatened with death in a comment on the news portal.

Journalists and leaders of the Association of Independent Journalists of Vojvodina (NDNV), Ana Lalić Hegedиš and Dinko Gruhonjić have been the target of an unprecedented case of death threats. Following their participation in the Rebedu festival in Dubrovnik and the distortion of their comments aimed at portraying the journalists as enemies of the state, the two were subjected to thousands of online death threats and intimidation practices by politicians. The situation escalated when a graffiti death threat was found on the wall of Gruhonjić's private residence and Lalic was insulted at her home. Despite the alarming level of threats, all reported to the High Tech Crimes Prosecutor's Office, the Serbian Ministry of Interior declared Gruhonjić safe in its security assessment. Meanwhile, one of the perpetrators of the death threat against Lalić also escaped from house arrest. In June, in the context of the elections, Gruhonjić faced increasing attacks, including threats of physical violence in the streets and being the target of leaflets near polling stations that portrayed him as a political opponent, a discourse fuelled by Prime Minister Vučević himself.

On several occasions, politicians verbally abused journalists in public debates. In January President Aleksandar Vučić denigrated N1 and journalist Gordana Bjeletić while N1 was accused by the Speaker of the Serbian National Assembly of "fake news" and causing "instability in society" in June.

MapMF recorded four physical attacks, including the case of Radar journalist Vuk Z. Cvijić who was assaulted by Srpski Telegraf editor Milan Lađević in the street. Two of the physical

attacks were related to elections. Journalist Ugljesa Bokić was assaulted by a former police officer while Marko Miletić, co-editor-in-chief of the news portal Mašina, was also attacked while investigating the electoral votes.

In Novi Sad, the demonstration in support of Ana Mihaljica, a mother whose three children have been temporarily taken away by the Centre for Social Work, shook the city, resulting in at least five journalists being verbally attacked while covering the protests. Journalists from TV channels Tanjug and Kurir, as well as radio station 021.rs, were verbally abused by the demonstrators in front of the Centre. N1 correspondent Ksenija Pavkov, who also covered the protest, was harassed online with threats of physical harm.

Journalists were arbitrarily denied access to municipal assembly sessions. In March, journalist Verica Marinčić, who works for the local portal "in medija.rs", was forcibly prevented from entering a public conference of the municipality of Indjija. The incident resulted in a physical assault as a security guard grabbed her arm and pushed her out of the building. Marinčić was also targeted with legal attacks with seven complaints filed against her and inmedija.rs.

Among legal incidents, the investigative portal KRIK faced the highest number of lawsuits with the characteristics of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs). In May, Judge Đorđević filed a lawsuit against KRIK journalists Bojana Pavlović and Stevan Dojčinović following the publication of a database mentioning her. Among the abusive sanctions sought, Đorđević requested a 10-month prison sentence for the journalists. In June, the Belgrade Appeals Court upheld two more KRIK verdicts, threatening a chilling effect on press freedom nationwide.

The cases documented during the first half of the year confirm the persistent trend in Serbia of a massive lack of trust in the public authorities by journalists, not only due to their blatant failure to carry out thorough investigations and prosecute those responsible for the threats but also given that they, at times, are the perpetrators of hate and harassment against journalists.

## *Ukraine*

In the first six months of 2024, Ukraine remained in a unique position among the EU Member States and candidate countries, as the only country with an active armed conflict taking place across its territory. This armed conflict, provoked by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, has led to an unprecedented security crisis which was in turn responsible for the death and injury of numerous media workers in Ukraine over the past two and half years.

MapMF recorded a total of 75 press freedom violations involving 168 persons or entities related to media. During this reporting period, no journalists were killed in relation to their

work. However, nine media workers sustained injuries of various gravity as a result of Russian attacks, in five separate incidents. Russian forces were also responsible for the jailing of several media workers in occupied territory of Ukraine, as well as for the bombing of media offices and other infrastructure in territory under Ukrainian control.

In parallel, journalists in Ukraine also faced issues provoked by domestic actors, who were often responsible for various incidents linked to censorship. This included instructions by the military to produce reports under a chosen angle, as well as informal management recommendations at Ukraine's national press agency Ukrinform, related to speakers that journalists were discouraged from engaging with.

In comparison to the first half of 2023, Ukraine experienced more attacks on media infrastructure, with attacks on TV towers and media offices multiplying over the first half of 2024. Six events of this type took place during this reporting period, which is more than throughout all of 2023. An especially alarming event of this type was Russia's destruction of the Kharkiv TV tower on 22 April.

Moreover, Russia's deliberate attacks on hotels and other civilian infrastructure known to be popular among journalists became an increasingly worrying trend. On 10 January 2024, a Russian strike targeted such a hotel in Kharkiv, leaving at least three journalists wounded. This came days after a similar attack on a different hotel in Kharkiv, which injured a Ukrainian fixer and a media security staff member.

At least two journalists came under fire while reporting from the front line, with one of them sustaining injuries. The monitoring period was, however, worryingly characterised by an increasing number of media workers wounded outside the context of front line reporting. This was in part caused by the particularly dire security situation in Kharkiv throughout the spring, which led to three journalists being wounded while reporting from Russian strikes in the city. Additionally, two Ukrainian journalists were wounded in similar conditions as a result of a Russian double-tap strike on the city of Zaporizhia on 5 April.

In Russian-occupied territory of Ukraine, no fewer than six journalists were arbitrarily detained or kidnapped by occupying authorities, with at least four of these media workers potentially facing lengthy prison terms on trumped-up charges.

In parallel to the worrying security situation created by continued Russian attacks, Ukrainian journalists faced issues provoked by domestic actors, even if these cannot be compared to the attacks by the Russian military.

Among these are two cases of surveillance of journalists recorded on MapMF. This included the case of investigative outlet Bihus.Info, whose employees were filmed in a private setting by individuals whom independent Ukrainian media believe are linked to Ukraine's State Security Service (SBU).

Additionally, several incidents of apparent state-sponsored intimidation of journalists took place. In January, unidentified individuals harassed investigative journalist Yuri Nikolov at his home in Kyiv. Later, independent reporting indicated that this harassment could have been ordered by the office of the President of Ukraine. In April, military officials attempted to hand a military summons document to Slidstvo.Info journalist Evheny Shulhat, days before the publication of his investigation into alleged corruption by a high-ranking SBU official, in another apparent attempt to intimidate Ukrainian media.

In May, following the dismissal of Oleksiy Matsuka, the director of Ukraine's state-owned news agency Ukrinform, several of the agency's journalists alleged that Matsuka had attempted to install a system of internal censorship at the outlet. While the reach of these interventions remains unclear, Ukrainian journalists denounced what was seen as a return to practices recalling the rule of President Viktor Yanukovych, Ukraine's pro-Russian ex-president who was overthrown in the 2014 Revolution of Dignity.

Another characteristic of media freedom violations in Ukraine, recorded both in this reporting period and in 2023, is the fact that these most typically happened online (40.0%).This preponderance can be in part explained by the frequency of hacking and DDoS attacks which targeted media outlets and journalists in Ukraine. With 14 such incidents recorded in the first six months of 2024, these represent nearly half of all such attacks across the EU Member States and candidate countries.

Russian sources are commonly thought to be responsible for most major hacking and DDoS attacks targeting media in this country, even if full identification of the organisers in such incidents is in most cases nearly impossible.

All in all, while Ukraine's media sector continues to experience serious challenges linked to Russia's war of aggression, both offline and online, MFRR monitoring has shown a worrying trend of emerging major issues provoked by an insufficient respect of media freedom by some representatives of Ukrainian military and civilian authorities.

# CONCLUSION

The interim monitoring report for 2024 has analysed press and media freedom violations in the European Union Member States and candidate countries for the first six months of the year. Overall, the MFRR monitoring officers recorded 756 alerts involving 1,212 journalists, media workers or outlets in this period.

For this report, the MFRR selected three outstanding topics covered in the thematic chapters: anti- media laws, spoofing (especially with the rise of generative AI tools), and elections.

In light of the developments covered in this report, the trends that have been showing a higher frequency in the first half of the year will keep their salience regarding the state of press and media freedom in the annual report. In particular, the steep increase in the number of press freedom alerts in Italy, the passing of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence in Georgia, the high number of cases concerning blocking journalistic activity in Hungary, and the continuation of the war in Ukraine and its implications on journalism are still points of concern.

The MFRR remains dedicated to tracking incidents across the aforementioned countries which are available on Mapping Media Freedom database and will also continue producing reports and fact-sheets analysing the state of press and media freedom 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 30 June 2024. 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 – 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 recorded as one alert. This means, when showing e.g. how many alerts included a certain type of attack, the sum of all shown numbers can be more than the total number of alerts and thus more than 100%.

MEDIA FREEDOM RAPID RESPONSE

European Federation of Journalists

International Press Institute

ECPMF EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR PRESS & MEDIA FREEDOM

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