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# Interviewing journalism

## Needs and gaps in support for European journalists

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*"It all begins by listening to what media professionals have to say, listening to their needs, their fears, their suggestions"*

*Dr. Lambrini Papadopoulou, Greek journalist*

## Introduction

Media independence and pluralism are under growing pressure almost in every country in Europe, put at risk by different kinds of issues such as an increasing precarisation of the profession, political interference, legal and digital threats. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated most of these problems.

This report is aimed at analysing the needs of journalists and the gaps in their support and protection in the EU and in candidate countries. It is based on an overview of the existing literature on the topic, an ongoing mapping of [stakeholders](#) and [support centres](#) produced for the [Resource Centre on Media Freedom in Europe](#) and on 24 in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

Such interviews were conducted with journalists, representatives of media outlets and of support organisations from 18 countries (EU member states or candidate countries), namely Austria, Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Montenegro, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

This research examines the needs of and gaps in support for European journalists in different contexts. Some patterns of development, some basic features of a (in this case, media) system might remain hidden to the sensitivity of insiders, because the observer is used to the context. Conversely, comparing the single issues under study (e.g. verbal harassment, or the lack of support for media operators on a local level) in different contexts permits by means of contrast to learn from the experience of others and to formulate hypotheses and potential solutions inspired by the comparison.

## 1. Macro and micro perspectives on the issues of journalism

Previous studies have already outlined what the most recurrent threats and pressures on European media workers and news outlets are in a comparative perspective (e.g. [Siapera, 2015](#); [McGonagle et al., 2020](#)). The most relevant issues emerging in the media sector can be observed from a macro-perspective (economic and political issues), rather than a micro perspective (legal pressures, verbal harassment, digital threats). They all together contribute to the current state of European journalism and it is worth recapitulating them with the words of our interviewees.

### (i) *Economic issues and political interference*

Media is not a profitable business, especially in the last few years. Therefore, there are other interests in maintaining in place news outlets, public and private ones.

In the past decades, a process of commercialization of the media sector took place, leading to an intertwining of interests in this field. In fact, media outlets are often owned by businessmen (so called “impure editors”), who do not only work in the editorial sector and, thus, who do not necessarily share the same priorities of the media professionals<sup>1</sup>.

Sometimes, as outlined by some of our interviewees, the media owners’ interests coincide with those of politicians and of the government, leading to clear phenomena of **political partisanship and instrumentalization of the media**<sup>2</sup>. This phenomenon is also described with the term “**media capture**”, when governments or government-affiliated enterprises exercise direct or indirect influence over the media landscape. According to a [2020 Reuters Institute’s report](#), in many Central and Eastern European countries there is “an outright state of media capture, where media outlets have been brought under direct or indirect government control”<sup>3</sup>.

Political interference is usually more intense in contexts with weak media markets: «In this financial crisis, journalists themselves are transformed into PR persons, undercover or openly PR persons for different political entities or politicians or businesses», the Romanian journalist Marina Constantinoiu, project coordinator of [Editia de Dimineată](#), told us. As a consequence, «this kind of

1 See Palmer M., Tunstall J. (eds.) (1991), *Media moguls*, London: Routledge.

2 See Hallin D. C., Mancini (2004), *Comparing Media Systems. Three Models of Media and Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Seymour-Ure C. (1974), *The Political Impact of Mass Media*, London: Constable.

3 Political interference may concern both public and private media. **Public service media (PSM) independence is increasingly weakening** because of three reasons: the reduction of resources, the restriction of their mission and the establishment of new regulations. Political interference is also visible when new governments replace the heads of PSM who were appointed by their predecessors ([Council of Europe, 2019](#)).

partisan journalism breaks the “loyalty path” between the journalist and their readers. The citizens nowadays always think that behind a story there would be a specific interest» said Andrea Di Pietro, Italian media lawyer interviewed for this research.

Our interviewee Irina Nedeva, president of the [Association of European Journalists \(AEJ\) of Bulgaria](#), pointed out that the rise of political pressure in the Bulgarian media scene is one of the main findings of their [2020 survey on media freedom](#). Among the EU member states, media capture is also particularly evident in [Hungary](#), where independent and critical outlets are being excluded from the media market to the advantage of pro-government actors. Hungarian independent outlets are also sometimes banned from official press conferences and from the Parliament, thus inhibiting the possibility of first-hand reporting: «It’s very difficult to do your job if politicians don’t talk to you», underlined our interviewee Daniel Pal Renyi, Hungarian investigative journalist for [444.hu](#).

**Political interference in the media sector is often exercised through the allocation of public advertising revenues**, sometimes raising concerns for the survival of independent media, especially those critical towards the government. This kind of practice intensified during the Covid 19 pandemic. One example from our interviews was outlined by Akvilė Venkutė, of the [Lithuanian Journalism Centre](#): «The media outlets lost revenues from advertising, so [the government offered to buy some of their content](#): but this is content management, not journalistic support. It would have been written that the content was bought but we did not find it an objective way of supporting the media»<sup>4</sup>.

Our interviewees suggested different solutions to the problem of financing independent media outlets. In short, **newsrooms have to rely on multiple sources** and thus should for example think about setting up a membership program, creating a paywall program for selected contents, participating in tenders and seeking money from international and regional donors. «What we can do is obviously turning to the readers», our Hungarian interviewee, journalist Renyi told us: «we try to look for alternative sources of income».

Finally, the **financial crisis of journalism**, which intensified in times of pandemic, has strong impacts on the profession, which is ever more **rarely a full-time profession**: in the last years, there was a **rise of low-paid and precarious freelance jobs**. Section 2 of this research will specifically be dedicated to the category of freelance journalists. As pointed out by our Romanian interviewee, Marina Constantinoiu, this **precarity equals vulnerability**: «Journalists as professionals are the last category in the market to be of any importance for the authorities. They don’t have contracts, they don’t have

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<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in Greece several critical media outlets have been excluded from governmental financial support during the Covid-19 crisis: <https://www.rcmediafreedom.eu/News/Greece-a-call-for-transparency-and-objectivity>.

salaries, they are unpaid for months, they don't have social protection, they don't have anything. So we as journalists are working in catastrophic conditions. It's very easy to attack journalists in any way because they are very vulnerable». The **casualisation of the profession paves the way for other kinds of threats, like legal and digital ones** that will be outlined in the following paragraphs.

## **(ii) Legal issues**

The 2020 European Commission (EC)'s Communication on the [European Democracy Action Plan](#) recognises the increasing use of **SLAPPs** (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) against journalists, namely lawsuits brought forward by powerful actors to [harass and silence](#) those speaking out in the public interest. SLAPPs can for example consist in **accusations of defamation, of violating the plaintiff's privacy or right to be forgotten** and the allegations are usually groundless or exaggerated. These legal threats sometimes even precede the publication of a journalistic work: as explained to us by Gill Phillips, director of the editorial legal services for The Guardian, «journalists in the UK usually write to the people they are going to write about for comments, and often what they get back are letters from their lawyers threatening to sue them».

Among the powerful actors who can sue a journalist, we find **companies, businessmen, but also public officials**. Politicians are the most common category of public officials abusing lawsuits, but they could also be judges or prosecutors as in [the case of The Guardian's journalist Lorenzo Tondo](#), interviewed for this research, who questioned in his articles the inquiry carried on by a judge in Sicily, who sued him.

**A SLAPP doesn't need to be successful to obtain its effect:** the case may stay in court for years, entailing [high costs and reputational damage](#) on the defendant. In the best scenario, in order to decrease the risk of receiving legal charges journalists might perform a “**self- fact checking**” operation themselves. «We know that we are working in a minefield, [...] so we consider that we may receive a lot of threats of SLAPP lawsuits. We have raised our capacity and our fact checking of the stories that we publish, for example for most stories we do line by line fact checking in order to avoid any small problems that a story might have», the Albanian journalist Besar Likmeta told us. In other cases, **the effect of legal charges is self-censorship:** being afraid that a certain investigation could lead to a lawsuit, the journalist (and often the editor) opt for silence.

The so-called **chilling effect** of a defamation or a slander lawsuit is the first aim of SLAPPs, and is **particularly effective against precarious journalists, freelancers who are not backed by a newsroom**. Therefore, it is fundamental to encourage the establishment of legal units inside the

newsrooms, for example to check the journalistic work *before* it gets published, to avoid eventual subsequent legal charges. While this is a common practice in big media outlets, as confirmed by Gill Phillips from The Guardian, it is not that common in the small ones. Therefore, it would be important to have at least one reference contact to which journalists can address all their doubts.

For this reason, many of our interviewees outlined that **journalists and editors need better training to raise awareness of these threats and to know how to react**, to improve their fact checking capabilities and to know how to respond to threats of lawsuits, who to ask support to. «A lot of journalists are not aware about their rights, they don't know exactly how they can defend themselves», Dr. Lambrini Papadopoulou, a journalist of the Greek media outlet [Documento](#), noted: «The surviving strategy adopted by most outlets towards their journalists is “try not to get sued”, which can be interpreted by journalists as “I will write in a way that I will not be sued” or “I will not write it at all”». «We know that we are working in a minefield, our response is to prepare ourselves as best as we can» told us Besar Likmeta, editor in chief of the Albanian outlet [Reporter.al](#).

Finally, there is a **need for legislative changes for discouraging vexatious lawsuits**. As Dr. Lambrini Papadopoulou told us, «it shouldn't be that easy for people in power to prosecute journalists». The law should ensure that media workers are protected from being brought to justice based on no evidence. This is why the Italian media lawyer Giulio Vasaturo suggests «to solicit the Parliament to adopt a law with a deflationary value with respect to the use of SLAPPs [...]. If the judge reveals the complete groundlessness of a claim, then they can condemn the plaintiff with a fine that is proportional to the sum that was demanded. We need to responsabilize the potential plaintiffs». «The great thing about SLAPPs is that they got the attention of the politicians in Europe, the Commission and the MEPs» said Gill Phillips «**Clearly you need political engagement if you want to change things**». As a result of a joint international campaign raising the awareness of the European Commission (EC) to engage in the protection of journalists and civil society against SLAPPs, in 2021 an expert group will be established with the aim of exchanging best practices of legal support in this field and advising the Commission on policy initiatives related to SLAPPs<sup>5</sup>.

### ***(iii) Verbal harassment***

In 2019, harassment and intimidation [turned out to be](#) the second most relevant category of threat, according to the data of the [Platform to promote the protection of journalism and safety of](#)

5 COM(2020)790.

[journalists](#) of the Council of Europe (CoE)<sup>6</sup>: these alerts outline that verbal harassment is “frequently propagated over social media, brands media workers as potential targets, in some instances triggering hostility, hate and violent actions against them”. According to the European Parliament’s guide “[Safety of Journalists and the fighting of corruption in the EU](#)” the attacks and their impacts are **linked to numerous factors such as gender** (see later in this report), **ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or age**. Moreover, a connection with the **topics covered in the news reports** can be traced: corruption, organised crime, environmental issues, migration, human rights, women’s rights and conflict reporting tend to expose the journalists to greater risks of being harassed<sup>7</sup>.

«Speaking about migrations means touching a sensible topic for politics and you need to be careful not to be covered by critiques, attacks, we call them *attacchi squadristi (translators’ note: carried out by members of a fascist squad)*»<sup>8</sup> the Italian journalist Angela Caponnetto told us. Also, the Greek journalists Dr. Papadopoulou recalled the story of the director of *Documento*, Kostas Vaxevani: «Everytime he revealed scandals, most of them involving tax evasion, apart from legal threats he also faced a lot of “character assassination” attempts, meaning that there were various rumours that he was taking money from the secret services, that he was collaborating with foreign powers etcetera».

In this sense, **politically organised smear campaigns** were outlined as a problem **especially by our interviewees from South East Europe**: Albania, [Bulgaria](#), Greece, Hungary, Serbia. Branko Čečen, director of the [Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia](#) (CINS), explains: «There is this constant and very vulgar smear campaign against all the voices of dissent, all entities that criticise the government and pro-government media. That creates an atmosphere that very often leads to physical violence, we are being named traitors, foreign mercenaries, criminals, so that goes constantly, it creates an atmosphere where it’s almost ok to attack us, to insult us and so on. So when public officials, like the President and really the highest officials of the country say similar things about us, sometimes calling us by name, that is practically an invitation for someone to do something». Similarly, the Hungarian journalist Daniel Pal Renyi explained to us how the Hungarian government is creating a hostile political environment for excluding critical journalists: «We have been labeled as enemies by

<sup>6</sup> Also see the statistics in [Mapping Media Freedom](#), for the category “intimidation/ threatening”.

<sup>7</sup> This is in line with the tendency in the realm of physical threats to journalists: according to the March- June 2020 [MFRR Monitoring Report](#), “a range of threats against journalists and media workers in Italy, Germany, Poland and Slovenia occurred at protests related to the COVID-19 pandemic (or the state’s response to it); in the United Kingdom and Belgium at Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests; and, in Germany, France, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom at rallies organised by far right political and extremist groups. In addition, journalists and media workers in Greece were subjected to threats of violence for covering the refugee and migrant crisis”.

<sup>8</sup> The tendency, in certain countries, to attack people, including journalists, who work on the migration issue was also outlined in the [2020 Rule of Law report](#) by the European Commission.



pro-government media »; « It is a constant media war, [...] we are trying to do our job and they are trying to provoke us».

Often, these smear campaigns are carried on online, by so-called **trolls**: these armies of online commenters and haters can be directly controlled by governments or act independently. The first case falls in a “**third generation of state control**” online<sup>9</sup>, that shifted from imposing blocks online to indirect interference in the production of content. In other cases, our interviewees outlined these haters usually belong to far-right groups, nationalist and homophobic groups and - in Covid times - anti-vaxers groups.

An alarming finding emerging from our interviews is that **most journalists have got used to these kinds of attacks and insults**, often **considering them as “part of the job”**. Not engaging with them is one strategy, as outlined by Esperanza Escribano, Spanish freelance journalist. «If I tweet and I start to receive attacks from for example pro-independence people or pro-Spain people... I don't respond, so it does not become “a thing”». Similarly, somewhere else in Europe: «I would say one of the main problems for journalists in Lithuania is now trolling and cyberbullying, and they don't receive so much attention. They are daily cases, maybe journalists got used to it: getting those comments, that sometimes I would say are hate speech, they don't take them seriously» said Akvilė Venckutė, from LZC.

Consequently, **journalists rarely report these verbal attacks to the police** and do not set up “defence mechanisms” to deter them. However, they end up being a **burden for journalists' daily life**: «I was afraid not to be able to carry on this job: when these attacks involve a certain political side and continue daily, you are afraid» told us the Italian journalist Angela Caponnetto. «I carried on also thanks to FNSI (Italian Federation of Journalists) and to the association “[Giulia giornaliste](#)”... the help of these people is very important, they “*virtually hug me*”. When I am attacked on social media I do not answer, but they answer for me, defending me. This is very important, it makes me feel I am not alone».

#### **(iv) Digital threats**

Online trolling and hate speech are one of the faces of the potential [digital threats](#) a journalist might encounter online. Besides it, there is a whole range of issues related to **digital security**, **surveillance** and to the **protection of journalists' [communications with their sources](#)** for example, but also to [disinformation](#) and to an increased exposure to **hackers' attacks**, which again can have an

<sup>9</sup> Deibert R. et al. (eds.) (2010), *Access Controlled. The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace*, MIT Press.

official (governmental) or non-official nature.

Gill Phillips - lawyer working for The Guardian - stated his concerns about state surveillance and the lack of checks and balances for authorities to monitor the journalists' work digitally<sup>10</sup>. «There is not a single moment in time when we don't have at least one person in our digital system», the Serbian journalist Branko Čečen underlined, considering how this **complicates communication with their sources**: «Sources are now under even bigger pressure than journalists themselves. [...] There are many people who want to approach us with facts, materials, proof, evidence and so on, but they are not conscious of the threats and of the dangers they might face. Somehow, we have to quickly educate them and ask them to communicate with us through secure channels, like encrypted emails. That is a problem, many of them ignore our suggestions, and we have to stop communicating with them because no matter how big the story is, we don't want to be responsible for their security».

This working methodology is still **not commonly adopted among journalists, especially in Western Europe**: «I would like to go back to my journalism school in France and say "I will offer you a course for free, but we need to teach how to use encrypted communication tools"» said Quentin Raverdy, French freelancer: «I started working as a journalist in Turkey, so I am fully aware of the importance of protecting data: here instead for my colleagues using Whatsapp is the highest level of protection».

The awareness in the field of digital security depends on the sector of journalism you work in: «Journalists who work in investigative projects, they are well prepared, they use secure networks to speak with sources... But otherwise, journalists writing editorials or working on other topics, they are not quite serious about it» underlined Akvilė Venckutė, from the Lithuanian Journalism Centre. Here comes the issue of the **importance of digital security training**, within and outside the newsrooms. For this reason, Irina Nedeva, president of AEJ Bulgaria - as well as most of the interviewees - underlined that «the most important things to be touched in **trainings** on digital safety regard how journalists can **secure their communication**, how they can secure their online activities in a way not to compromise their sources, to keep their sources and their own privacy».

### **(v) Physical assaults**

Physical assaults include **killings, abductions, threats and acts of violence against the physical integrity** of journalists and media operators, their family members and other media actors as well as against their sources. In different countries, organised crime groups are the main

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<sup>10</sup> In this sense, see the ECtHR judgment [Big Brother v. UK](#) (2018).

[perpetrators of acts of violence against media workers](#). The murders of Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta in 2017 and of Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in Slovakia in 2018 have [raised public and official awareness in the EU](#) about this topic.

It is important to stress the serious [link between journalists' safety and impunity](#). The **need for independent investigations** in case of attacks against journalists is particularly felt in countries where the independence of the police and the judiciary is weak. «The prosecutors' investigations lead to no results. [...] This is true for two main reasons: first, the lack of preparation of prosecutors; second, the lack of political will from those in power», the Montenegrin interviewee, Nikola Marković, told us. In those countries, mostly located in South East Europe but that may include Malta and some central European countries as well, different stakeholders expressed the **importance of carrying out autonomous investigations**. Branko Čečen - Director of the Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia - suggests the creation of a comprehensive project aimed at collecting evidence and data to counter the lack of action of the police<sup>11</sup>. Similarly, Nikola Marković, President of the Commission for Monitoring Investigation of Attacks on Journalists of Montenegro<sup>12</sup>, proposes the establishment of a team for investigating each case of violation, «in which members of our Commission should participate along with police and prosecutors. This way, they won't be able to cover up cases».

**Physical attacks against journalists are increasingly frequent during demonstrations and protests, carried out both by demonstrators and police officers**. Our Spanish interviewee offers an example: «I experienced violence from the national police. They shot me with a rubber bullet when I was covering the Catalan protests in 2017... they knew I was a journalist, because I was behind the cameraman... and they shot me with a rubber bullet [...] We could not tell the number of the policeman who shot and we were working 12/14 hours a day, they were crazy days, so I did not have the time to accuse them of anything». In this regard, the [European Centre for Press and Media Freedom](#) (ECPMF) developed the [Press Freedom Police Codex](#)<sup>13</sup> with the aim of raising awareness, providing a starting point for the [dialogue](#) between journalists and police, and guiding individual police decisions.

11 In Serbia, the Commission for the Investigation into the Murders of Journalists was [established](#) in 2012 to reopen cases and investigate crimes against journalists during the Balkan wars but its inefficiency is often pointed out. A new Working Group for the Security and Protection of Journalists was established in December 2020 but some of its members [withdrew from it](#) in protest of the [Serbian government's continuous attacks](#) against journalists.

12 The Montenegrin Commission is a peculiar attempt to tackle official investigations' inefficiency. It was established in 2012, and is now composed of independent investigators and representatives of the state authorities. As explained by Marković, «The Commission is not competent for carrying on investigations as the police and the prosecutors do: we only monitor their work». Find more information in the MFRR Fast Response Mission Report on Montenegro: <https://www.rcmediafreedom.eu/Publications/Reports/MFRR-Fast-Response-Mission-Report-Montenegro>.

13 Also quoted in the EC Communication on the EU Democracy Plan (2020): <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0790&from=EN>

In many cases, it would be necessary to train the police on how to deal with journalists, for example during demonstrations, or in the course of investigation activities.

**2020 was characterized by anti-Covid measures demonstrations all around Europe**, led by negationists and anti-vaxers. These protests registered physical attacks against journalists covering them: IPI and the [Media Freedom Rapid Response](#) consortium (MFRR) [highlighted](#) this issue already in April 2020, reporting some significant cases of threats against journalists around Europe during anti-Covid measures demonstrations. We interviewed a German freelance journalist, Beate-Josefine Luber, who directly experienced violence during an anti Covid-19 measures demonstration and told us: «I think the problem of aggressions against journalists in anti-corona demonstrations is rising. I don't know how to tackle this. [...] I had the feeling that the police was not aware of the fact that these anti-corona demonstrations have this aggressive potential».

These words pave the way for another consideration, related to the **threats to journalistic freedom in times of pandemic**.

#### ***(vi) Covid- related issues***

**Media freedom has been restricted due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in different ways**: some of them were already outlined in the previous paragraphs. In addition, access to public information has been limited, press conferences have been restricted and the working situation for journalists deeply changed in terms of daily life and professional security.

In many cases, journalists encountered **difficulties in gathering data on the pandemic**, since their access to official sources was restricted. In this sense, the Hungarian journalist Daniel Pal Renyi told us: «There is certain information that they [the government] do not share with us... They are only sharing the basic information, about deaths, about the amount of positive tests [...]. We do not get any detailed statistics, we have to do that on our own. Sometimes they even provide false information, incorrect information and we discover it. It's restricted to give out information from the hospitals, so all the information influx is very controlled. The only way to get information is from the government [...]. The Ministry for Internal Affairs controls now all the hospitals [...]. They guarantee that no information is being given out and that no video footage can be shot in the hospitals».

Moreover, **official press conferences moved online** entailing a series of consequences: our Spanish interviewee told us that «the [Spanish] government was giving press conferences, and in the beginning it was without journalists there, and not only that, they did not have the right to ask questions themselves on Zoom or Skype. There was the communication secretary in the place and he

was receiving the questions and reading them to the President, or the Ministry or whoever... and there was a lot of complaining about that, because obviously he was not reading them the way a journalist would and **they would not give you the right to re-question things**». Similarly, the Lithuanian interviewee Akvile Venckute pointed out that «the government conferences were online, these circumstances created the ability to **pick easily only the questions they preferred**, differently than if you were in the same room. If you shut up a journalist in the conference room everybody would see, and there would be a scandal».

Covid also imposed **new ways of doing journalism**, not only with regard to the authorities. The Lithuanian journalist we interviewed told us: «I think it is not good for journalists to sit at home. You need to go and see with your eyes [...]. Then sometimes your interviewees might not even have an Internet connection or don't know how to use Zoom for example.... so the circle, the range of people you are interviewing is narrowing down». «I miss my "boots on the ground», the Italian journalist Angela Caponnetto said.

Moreover, the French freelancer Quentin Raverdy outlined «this situation rendered us [freelancers] **increasingly dependent on the breaking news**. Covid concentrated all the latest news on this topic, so nowadays it is still difficult to propose a story that goes beyond the theme of the pandemic».

Finally, as for any other profession, the pandemic has had a strong impact on media workers and **many people lost their jobs**: «Many colleagues working on culture, sport... they were strongly impacted by the coronavirus crisis. Some of them left the profession or are thinking about it» said Raverdy; «I was "lucky" because I was working on Italy, which was the first European country hit by the virus, so I had a lot of work to do», told us.

Given the relevance of the impact of the pandemic on press freedom, IPI developed a [Covid-19 press freedom tracker](#); the [European Federation of Journalists \(EFJ\)](#) has published a [database](#) mapping the financial support media outlets and journalists received in Europe and the Media Freedom Rapid Response consortium added a "[Corona watch](#)" section to its crowd-sourcing platform on threats against journalists, Mapping Media Freedom. «Covid 19 is a specific, comprehensive kind of threat for press freedom and we are very afraid that some of the threats that have been introduced during this period are likely to stay and shape the state of news media in the years to come», observed the Greek journalist Lambrini Papadopoulou .

## 2. The most vulnerable: freelancers, local and women journalists

A lot of journalists are vulnerable: those working for small media outlets, those reporting from war or conflict zones, women journalists, younger journalists, those belonging to minorities (e.g., LGBT, Roma journalists) and so on. In our interviews, three categories emerged as most vulnerable: freelance, local and women journalists.

### *Freelance journalists*

Freelance journalists are on the rise, because of the [casualization of the journalistic profession](#).

On the bright side, these journalists highlight their working style is more independent: «I prefer the freedom of working as a freelancer, to be able to decide who to work with, how to work, how to distribute my time», the Spanish freelancer Esperanza Escribano told us. «I could never work in a 8-18 newsroom in Paris, it's a working style that does not suit me», the French freelancer Quentin Raverdy said to us. However, the [difficulties related to being a freelancer](#) seem to be more numerous than the positive sides.

First of all, freelancers suffer from the **decreasing payments**: in Italy, for example, the local newspaper Il Mattino recently announced that the payment per-piece [will drop](#) from 9 to 7 euros. «I thought that in France things were bad, but Italy is scary. And unfortunately this explains the quality of many articles, when you know they are paid 10 Euros it is normal that some can't afford to spend too much time doing proper research», said the Rome-based French journalist Quentin Raverdy. «In France there is this really interesting website - [Paye ta pige](#) - where freelancers made a list of about 100 media outlets with the average payment you could ask for... I would say the minimum average is around 60 Euros for a *foyer* (1500 characters)». Escribano, who now works as a freelance correspondent for the BBC, notes that **«you cannot live as a freelance journalist in Spain if you don't work for an international media**. Or you can if you work 12 hours a day, but it would be almost impossible».

As highlighted by [Siapera \(2015\)](#), it is frequent to find freelancers holding an exclusive working relationship with one employer, that is to say **they are entirely dependent on one news outlet but do not enjoy the same rights deriving from a regular contract**. In this sense, Raverdy told us: «I belong to a small category, that of freelance correspondents, that is often forgotten: I work 100% for

the French press and I pay my taxes in France but I can't enjoy many things... for example in France you can ask state subsidies we cannot ask from abroad, also speaking of Covid-19 subsidies». Additionally, the Italian lawyer Vasaturo noted that «the modalities to access the journalistic profession are still conditioned by mechanisms that exacerbate precarity. [...] For example, someone is employed as a trainee but they are a full-time correspondent. [...] We need to face this hypocrisy, [...] to affirm a sense of legality that should be rooted also inside the journalistic community». Another example in this sense also comes from Italy: our interviewee Angela Caponnetto had a years-long legal trial against the public broadcaster RAI, where she was employed in a different position than the work she was actually doing as a reporter. «After I sued them I was distanced from RAI, that's the company's policy [...]. Then I won the first instance trial and I came back with a weaker contract, because they appealed. It was hard to go back to a company where a 8-year-long trial was ongoing, where I was an "enemy" and I was keeping on fighting for my professional dignity». Our Albanian interviewee also outlined that «the media owners tend to breach the law in terms of journalists' working rights. So we need better inspections from the government».

Many of our interviewees underlined that **[strong journalistic unions for freelancers are crucial for tackling this situation](#)**: «I would say the main problem for Spanish freelance journalists would be to get a union or an organisation that can defend that our salaries are not fair. [...] I have spoken about it with other freelance journalists, that we don't really have any organisation to defend our interests». Similarly, Akvilė Venckute, from Lithuania, told us: «If I were a freelance journalist I am not sure if I would get help from the union, they are not very active in this field, there is much more to be done». Sometimes freelancers are not represented by the existing journalistic unions, while the unions' work would be key for ensuring the improvement of freelancers' working conditions on a country base. This objective is promoted, on a local and European level, by the **[Freelance Experts' Group](#)** of the European Federation of Journalists."

**Labor rights could also be an object of journalistic training**, especially for young journalists: journalists' working rights should be better taught in journalism schools, our French interviewee suggests. «Otherwise, as it happened to me, when you enter the work market you really feel naked: we should be taught how to deal with precariousness, how to pay taxes, how to access social protection from abroad...».

In order **to fill the gap in resources, freelance journalists often look for grants**<sup>14</sup>: however, finding and applying for such grants is not always easy. In this sense, Raverdy noted how being

<sup>14</sup> In this sense, see for example the funds made available by the EC: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/call-proposals-media-freedom-and-investigative-journalism->

dependent on the breaking news to obtain a basic salary takes your time from elaborating a grant's application: «On one side, I do not feel entitled to ask for it, because I dedicate most of my time to do a work news agencies could do as well [...]. On the other side we can't find the time to fill 10 pages, a budget plan and so on if we have to deal with our daily work as well. [...] Then, the associations offering such grants should work a little bit more on their communication: [finding grants] is like a mental gym... if you are not used to look for them you need to spend a lot of time on it». It has also to be noted that funding journalistic work through individual grants only guarantees solutions for successful individuals and not for the community of working journalists.

Finally, the [financial pressure](#) caused by SLAPPs adds on the economic difficulties that journalists experience: «if possible, **the number of these charges has risen with the casualization of the journalistic profession**», the Italian media lawyer Di Pietro told us. Therefore, freelance journalists are **more exposed to risks, because they are not backed by a newsroom**. In this regard, the German freelance journalist Luber stressed: «Every time I have thousands of questions: can I publish it? Is taking this video allowed? What I need to be aware of? When I was employed in a news outlet I could refer to their legal counselor. But as a freelance journalist, I don't have any possibility to ask and the unions are not able to help me because they don't know how to deal with online material. [...] As a freelancer, I need someone who can really answer my questions».

### ***Local journalists***

The second category of journalists in dire need of support includes **local journalists** working for media outlets located in small cities.

First, **in small/rural towns it is easier to control journalists** than in bigger cities: sometimes, as reported for example by our Italian and Serbian interviewees, local mafia gangs are more active in small cities; moreover, the **closer presence of powerful politicians that oversee many societal sectors** acts as a deterrent, if not as a direct form of pressure. «One of the risks for the local press is to become just a *local agenda* as we have seen sometimes in France» told us the freelance journalist Quentin Raverdy. As the secretary general of the [South East Europe Media Organisation \(SEEMO\)](#) told us, in a small town you may find «the mayor that at the same time is the boss of a company, but also of the local party and controls everything, maybe additionally he is also the media owner or his best friend or family member is the media owner or CEO». Romanian journalist Marina Constantinoiu agrees with this standpoint: «In a smaller community it is easier for politicians and businessmen to put the journalists' work in danger». Beate Luber, a German freelancer working in a small city, highlights



that her level of psychological stress is higher when she works there rather than in the capital, because there is always the risk to meet her persecutors around: «I have paranoia because when you live in a small city of like 500 people and many of them hate you, and I see them while I'm shopping... It is too much for me. When I am in Berlin [...] everything is okay, but as a local journalist I think people who hate me are too close».

Second, local newspapers also face **more severe economic challenges**: due to their smaller size, it is hard for them to find resources other than the ones provided by the local government. This way, it is easier to threaten them, as Bartosz Węglarczyk, editor in chief of [ONET.pl](https://www.onet.pl) in Poland, pointed out during the last [MFRR mission to Poland](#). Similarly, in Lithuania, «a few years ago there was a discussion about this [EU public] publicizing money and I remember that especially papers and radios in the local towns could not imagine surviving without those articles paid by municipalities or the government... it used to be a really big part of their budget it seems», said the Lithuanian journalists we interviewed. However, **local investigative journalism seems to be a promising sector**, as also many international donors offer grants in this direction. «There are more and more newspapers that are launched and are dedicated to local inquiries, because there is a whole gap there so there is a lot of work that can be done» the French journalist Raverdy noted, «However funds are lacking... It is very difficult to find the money on a local level and meanwhile reporting what is wrong in the small city. Funds are lacking for carrying on independent work, but I believe this is a promising sector».

An additional issue is related to the fact that, on a local level, **public authorities (politicians, judges, police) seem to be less prepared on the rights of journalists and their consequent duties**: Kersti Forsberg - director of the Fojo Media Institute in Sweden - explained that in many parts of Sweden it is hard to find police agents properly aware of the risks and rights of media workers. « I would say the biggest problem is that it's very dependent on the individual police officer you meet when you try to file your complaint. [...] If you call the police in your hometown, out in the middle of nowhere, [...] they are not trained enough. So you are treated very differently depending on where you live». This seems to be true elsewhere in Europe as well, in Italy: Angela Caponnetto, reporter for the public broadcaster RAI, said that «On a local level, rural especially, there is total abandonment». Explaining how she and her troupe were chased by two people in the streets of a small city in Calabria, she explains: «I had to call the gendarmerie in Rome to contact someone on the field... there you are in a desert! This is even more true for people based there full time: the troupe was local and now they are afraid of witnessing in court. The cameraman told me "you are leaving, but I am staying here"».

As it will be better outlined later, giving **more publicity** to cases of threats against local journalists is a strong form of support: one example is provided by Branko Čečen, who explained how some famous journalists from Belgrade raise a case when some colleagues in small towns are under pressure. The publicity given to a specific case can also depend on the fact a **legal case is raised or not** following threats against a journalist: in this sense, besides being more vulnerable to threats, **local journalists are often overlooked** by support organisations. In fact, due to financial restraints, support organisations usually engage in **strategic litigation**: they can't take care of everyone, so they choose to deal only with cases that could create a precedent and greater echo in the public opinion and in the legal community. The Italian media lawyer Andrea Di Pietro confirmed to us that «the donors of our legal office expect strategic cases [...] This need to handle mediatic and strategic cases frustrates the expectations of local journalism».

For this reason, there emerged a **need for grassroots organisations to support local journalists**. Victoria Lavenue from Reporters Without Borders said to us that «**providing more funding to nationally based organisations** would be more relevant, [...] it would be a first step for a journalist: having someone to whom he can physically talk, having a peer support group of people sharing the language, facing the same threats. We can try as hard as we can, but we are away, we are in Paris and we talk through emails. So even if it is helpful, it's not enough».

### ***Women journalists***

Finally, **women journalists** are a vulnerable category<sup>15</sup>. Firstly, they **suffer from verbal harassment more than their male colleagues**. As outlined by Kersti Forsberg, Director of the [Fojo Media Institute](#) in Sweden, «if you are a woman it's also quite common that [a threat] is describing what they want to do with your body, threats of rape and sexual abuse». «Some photos of me behind a lot of muscular black men started circulating» told us the Italian journalists Angela Caponnetto; «In the beginning I did not give it so much importance; then they became increasingly heavy, like “you have to die”, “you have to end up like Ilaria Alpi<sup>16</sup>». Also, your marital status may be the object of negative comments: «In Lithuania, you can change your surname and its ending shows if you are married or not, so if a woman decides not to take her husband's surname, others think she's still unmarried and she receives a lot of comments about that», Akvilė Venckutė - from LZC - explained to

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15 For example, see the Committee to Protect Journalists' campaign on this issue: <https://cpj.org/campaigns/safety-women-nonbinary-journalists-online-offline/>

16 Ilaria Alpi was an Italian journalist killed in Somalia in 1994 while working on the illegal smuggling of toxic waste from Europe to the African country.

us. «Especially when they work on social problems, on children, on family legislation, they get comments like “you don’t have children, how can you speak about that?”».

As outlined above, verbal harassment often takes place online: numerous studies confirm that **women journalists receive [more digital threats](#) than men**<sup>17</sup>. Also, **threats against women journalists are frequently [underreported](#)**, putting at stake the awareness of gender-based harassment.

**Gender-based discrimination** is also meaningful in terms of **professional rights**: in this field, as well as in the case of other professions, some issues are related with with maternity. «Women are expected to take care of kids and soon after I got pregnant, I don’t know I became like “an empty place”! Nobody was speaking to me about future projects or... I was even working by that time, but somehow nobody cared about my opinion anymore because I was about to be out of work for 1 year and 2 months» told us the Lithuanian journalist we interviewed. Also because of the need for flexibility, **women tend to become freelance journalists more than men**. This is one of the issues for women journalists highlighted by our Spanish interviewee, the freelancer Esperanza Escribano: «we see that the majority of freelancers are women, which are normally worse paid than normal journalists... and also we see differences in salaries for those working on media outlets. We still see we have news on gender violence that puts all the pressure and responsibility on victims. And... when we decide to be mothers, there is a huge discrimination because usually it is women who decide to get a part time job after having a child. For these reasons, in Catalonia we founded the group “[Feminist communicators](#)”».

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<sup>17</sup> See this 2020 OSCE guide for improving the safety of female journalists online:  
<https://www.rcmediafreedom.eu/Publications/Reports/Safety-of-Female-Journalists-Online-A-SOFJO-Resource-Guide>

### 3. Existing support: what should be implemented

The NGOs, civil society organisations and unions working on media freedom and journalistic safety in Europe operate both with an international or with a regional focus. As part of this research, [OBC Transeuropa](#) mapped **the existing stakeholders and support centres for the Resource Centre on Media Freedom in Europe**, which can be consulted by country. They usually offer training, legal assistance, relocation programmes and, more rarely, psychological support. On a state level, police protection can also be listed among the forms of support institutionally offered to journalists at risk.

Among the main shortcomings of the existing support mechanisms, as also confirmed by our interviewees, there is a **lack of focus and resources in local contexts**: in this sense, for example, the issue of making available small funds for a higher number of small media outlets and organisations, simplifying the application processes, has been highlighted by a variety of actors. Different representatives of small support organisations complained that for them it is hard to receive EU funds: they do not have a large staff to prepare such applications and/or are not included in certain international networks. Finally, the short-termness of some funds was also highlighted: our interviewees considered that EU assistance would be more sustainable if it invested in staff and structural maintenance of some organisations rather than offering funds strictly linked to one project, that leaves the organisations alone again when the project ends. Moreover, a lack of networking emerged among local stakeholders and support centers on the EU level.

Most importantly, there emerged some **difficulties from the side of journalists in getting to know this “bubble of journalism supporters”**. Victoria Lavenue (RSF) pointed out that training is important for **getting to know the existence of support organisations**, since «many of our journalists are not aware of the network of organisations that already exist and could support them». There is a **wide range of resources available** for journalists interested in training and in having a handbook where they can easily find useful tools and practices. However, our interviewees pointed out that **it is not simple for a journalist not to get lost in the high number of reports, manuals, seminars** available for their defense. This aspect was also outlined by Gill Phillips, director of the editorial legal services for The Guardian: «Journalists want to know how to access the available resources easily. No one wants to spend hours looking through websites [...] People don't do that». Therefore, **curating repositories that collect information about journalists' safety issues has to**

**be considered a priority:** they assemble resources produced from different stakeholders but scattered in different locations<sup>18</sup>. More generally speaking, **media freedom organisations should design better ways of communicating and reaching out to their potential beneficiaries.**

### ***(i) Training***

When asked the direct question “what do threatened journalists need?”, the vast majority of our interviewees answered “training”. Journalistic training can cover a great variety of issues, from digital and physical safety to raising awareness of the legal charges that might follow the publication of a journalistic work. Moreover, **training does not necessarily address only journalists themselves, but every actor involved in their protection, like lawyers, police agents and judges.**

In many of the countries under study for this report, **the importance of training** resulted to be **underestimated by editors**. This is especially true in the Balkans, argues Saša Leković - director of the Investigative Reporter Center, trainer and former President of the [Croatian Journalists' Association](#): «Editors are not well educated, they are sending people in the field with no training at all». One of the reasons why newsrooms, especially in South and South-East Europe, are not interested in training their journalists is linked to the above mentioned high number of “impure editors”: **media owners are usually involved in a variety of businesses, and journalism is not their core activity**, as further explained by Leković. This tendency is confirmed by Besar Likmeta, editor-in-chief of [Reporter.al](#), an Albanian online media outlet: «There is a lack of investment in professional journalism. The news outlets are not interested in quality journalism, but in propaganda-making. And for propaganda you don't need very much to train journalists. [...] So, it depends on the attitude, on the integrity of journalists themselves to look for training». For the same reasons, as outlined by Oliver Vujović, secretary general of SEEMO, **the knowledge acquired by journalists during workshops is rarely put into practice**: «You are educating the young journalists, but the media owners, especially if we speak about some tycoons, are not interested in this knowledge the journalists got, to use it into practice, because you educated journalists to respect professional standards and quality but the media owner has no interest that the journalists are respecting professional standards».

Because of the peculiarities of the media context and the specific needs of journalists in each individual country, according to Oliver Vujović, **training should be country oriented**. According to him, the workshops organised by SEEMO seem to be more effective when specifically targeting one country and conducted in the **local language**: accordingly, the organisation decided to address the

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<sup>18</sup> In this sense, visit the [“Training” section](#) of the Resource Centre on Media Freedom in Europe.

needs of most peripheral journalists, and to conduct seminars in smaller towns. This approach could also be useful for overcoming some logistical problems: as pointed out by Akvilė Venckutė, from the Lithuanian Journalism Centre, «the problem is that the courses we organise usually are in the capital city and not always we have funds to cover travel expenses for journos in small cities». Of course, some of these considerations are not valid anymore, **in times of pandemic**, when all the training activities have moved online: on the bright side, the number of participants in training activities is potentially endless, many stakeholders reported they are having better outreach online. On the other side, however, **the human side of training activities is lost**: «Usually our training is with people from different newsrooms, different media companies, different parts of the country, and they all meet, share experiences and learn from each other. Of course you can chat also online but it's not the same» underlined Kersti Forsberg, Director of the Fojo Media Institute in Sweden.

One more consideration emerged from our study of the existing training resources, tools and from our interviews: **journalists are not the only ones who need training**. Numerous stakeholders recognise the **importance of education for lawyers, judges and the police** as well<sup>19</sup>. In this field, linked to the existence of a properly functioning separation of powers and the independence of the judiciary and the public order forces, there are considerable gaps between different European countries, once again putting among the **top priorities the need of designing local actions of support**: «You should not adopt the perspective of developed European countries: here the judiciary is not independent. It depends on the political parties», our Montenegrin interviewee Nikola Marković told us. The need for transnational relations in order to compare good practices and experiences - especially considering policy making - was stressed by our interviewee Dejan Georgievski, President of the [Media Development Center of North Macedonia](#): «We are always in need of someone who could give us more information about how local media law works or how, for example, broadcasting licenses work in different countries. Some of that information is very difficult to find online». However, the **context's variables** should always be kept in mind: the single national peculiarities might render one successful solution adopted in one country ineffective somewhere else.

## ***(ii) Legal assistance***

Numerous organisations Europe-wide offer legal assistance to journalists. They range from local

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, the CoE's programme called [HELP for legal professionals](#), where free online courses address legal professionals, judges, lawyers and journalists, media professionals, for training them on journalists' rights and duties. Additionally, the CoE and the EU [co-founded](#) the project "Reinforcing Judicial Expertise on Freedom of Expression and the Media in South-East Europe (JUFREX)" to build capacity within the state apparatus to protect free expression and media freedom.

ones, especially unions, to international ones like [Media Defence](#), [Free Press Unlimited](#) and ECPMF. Usually, these organisations offer **pro bono law services** - or connect those in need with firms and lawyers working low fee or pro bono- offer legal advice, **engage in strategic litigation** and offer grants that allow the applicant to pay for legal representation and strategic litigation.

In addition to free legal assistance, they offer a variety of services. For instance, they promote training courses for lawyers, collect funds for organisations that wish to establish a legal unit, organise awareness raising campaigns and independent legal observations. The importance of offering pro-bono legal assistance emerged as particularly important: «We must consider the fact that among the costs a journalist has to face, there are legal assistance costs. [...] So, the first element is the creation of an instrument that would encourage legal partnerships, meaning a selection of lawyers available for journalists in need», outlined Giulio Vasaturo, Italian media lawyer.

«The associations who offer this kind of support need **more funding**: we [from The Guardian] can count on our newsroom, but for other colleagues it is a fundamental help, otherwise you are alone in front of the judge, the politician, the mayor...», said Lorenzo Tondo, Guardian’s correspondent from Italy. Moreover, as previously said in this report, the tactic of **engaging in strategic litigation cases sometimes does not meet the needs of local and lesser known journalists**.

We have examined the importance of **strengthening local support organisations**: this aspect appears to be particularly important for legal assistance, given the fact that the knowledge of a legislative (and thus, linguistic) context is definitely country-specific and can hardly be assigned to international lawyers. This necessity, however, clashes with the fact that there is a **lack of country-based specialised media lawyers**, a gap that needs to be filled.

### ***(iii) Relocation programmes***

“Every year, scores of **journalists are forced to leave their countries to escape threats to their safety**, threats that have arisen because they have performed their duties, as journalists, to report the truth and to inform the public” ([Yeginsu, 2020](#)). For this reason, various European organisations offer relocation assistance to media workers in need, often considering them **Human Rights Defenders in need**. Most of these organisations are part of the [EU Human Rights Defenders Relocation Platform](#), which for example includes ECPMF: they offer these journalists at risk the possibility to stay in another country, or in another city, for a certain period of time. Our [mapping of support centres in Europe](#) shows that relocation programmes usually offer training sessions, psychological counselling and visibility of the case (if the journalist doesn’t want to remain

anonymous).

This research found that one of the shortcomings of relocation programmes consists in the fact they are **almost exclusively offered in Western Europe** and the **available spots are not enough** compared to the application requests they receive. «We receive 5/600 applications per year and we only have 25 spots available in the Netherlands; luckily we also work with other partners [...] but anyway we don't have a place for everyone who needs to be relocated», told us Suzan Goes, coordinator of the [Justice and Peace's Shelter City](#) initiative in the Netherlands. The limited availability of spots entails that more critical situations are prioritised, thus ensuring the protection is offered to journalists coming from conflict areas. This situation implies that journalists coming from "safe" countries (as EU countries are usually considered), even if under threat, face more difficulties in being relocated.

Another aspect that is sometimes underestimated is the **need to avoid cultural shocks to journalists who are relocated** and are already in a stressful situation. In this sense, the years-long experienced organisation [Protect Defenders](#) recommended that "if relocation is inevitable, **priority should be given to relocation in the defender's own country** or in his/her sub-region if possible, thus allowing him or her to continue doing their work close to their country". In fact, as highlighted by Suzan Goes, «sometimes you relocate people from certain regions to the Netherlands, in most of the cases it goes well but sometimes people experience a cultural shock and have difficulties adapting». One experience in this direction is the [Journalists-in-Residence Milan](#) (Italy): it implemented a local relocation programme, opening it to media workers working in Italy. Country relocations are also easier to organise in light of the Covid-related difficulties for travelling internationally.

#### ***(iv) Police protection mechanisms***

Journalists whose lives are at immediate risk may need institutional protection run by the police. It is **very difficult to find information about the police protection mechanisms**, and it is even more difficult to seek information on specific protection mechanisms targeting journalists<sup>20</sup>. Sometimes, a full-time police protection is offered to people in sensitive situations, but in most cases the protection mechanism is only active during their journeys in the country or abroad.

**The Italian system of police protection is very well developed**, because of the decades-long experience the public order forces have in dealing with organised crime (which is usually also one of the most common reasons why journalists receive police protection). Among the merits of the Italian

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<sup>20</sup> Some information can be found in the OSCE's website: <https://polis.osce.org/>.



system, according to the Prosecutor Cafiero de Raho, interviewed for the report [“Italy: So Much Mafia, So Little News”](#), is the fact that “it not only provides for the management and allocation of police escorts to journalists who ask to be protected, but also an active role for the investigative apparatus to discover and foil plans for retaliation and revenge attacks against journalists”. Moreover, another merit of the system is its risk-prevention approach<sup>21</sup>.

However, the system is not perfect: a significant weakness is that [it is difficult to have access to it if you are not a famous journalist](#). There are hundreds of local reporters that work in hard conditions but struggle to obtain protection, as well as to get preventive interventions. Moreover, the system was designed to protect against “domestic threats” (e.g., the Italian mafia), while journalists are increasingly exposed to transnational threats.

Under a psychological point of view, the Italian journalists and media lawyers interviewed for this research underlined it would be important to institutionalise the exchanges among journalists who experienced to work under protection. Moreover, one of our Italian interviewees denounces the responsibility of politicians in the way a high number of citizens perceives journalists under police protection: instead of remarking the importance to protect journalists, certain figures prefer to send the opposite message, that journalists under protection are privileged and don’t need such protection.

A clear **need to establish and improve the police protection mechanisms in other EU countries and at the EU level emerged**<sup>22</sup>. As highlighted by the Italian journalist Nello Scavo describing his own personal experience in Malta «They don’t have the same experience the Italian police has gained in all these years. [...]. Abroad, the protection is a bodyguard, a person who is always after you, who accompanies you, but there is no risk analysis [...] Maltese colleagues are really at risk, you see them walking on the streets and they are insulted, threatened, pushed».

### **(v) Psychological support**

The issue of psychological pressure is a recurring problem. Different agents exert this form of pressure on journalists: public authorities, public officials, other journalists, businessmen and anonymous parties. This type of intimidation takes different forms: harassment, verbal attacks, threats of reprisals, legal charges. Indirect means can include “coercion or pressure, by way of violence,

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21 In this sense, an [Inter-Force Centre](#) involving the Interior Ministry, the police, the National Federation of Journalists (FNSI) and the Order of Journalists was established in 2017. However, its efficiency is highly dependent on politics, especially on the figure of the Interior Ministry. <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/ministero/osservatori-commissioni-e-centri-coordinamento/centro-coordinamento-sul-fenomeno-atti-intimidatori-nei-confronti-dei-giornalisti> .

22 Find a list of existing protection mechanisms in [this list](#) of good practices elaborated by the MFRR consortium as a form of recommendation to the UK government.

threats, financial penalties or inducements to derogate from accepted journalistic standards and professional ethics and to engage in the dissemination of propaganda or disinformation”<sup>23</sup>. The **cumulative impact of this pressure** has [serious consequences](#), so threatened journalists can understandably be in **need of psychological support**. One of our interviewees told us that in the three years the legal charges against him were ongoing, he was «not sleeping at night anymore, suffering from **anxiety, having panic attacks at every trial**». Writing a book on his experience was described as “therapeutic”.

According to our mapping of the support centres for journalists in Europe, **few organisations provide psychological support to journalists and media workers**: those that do so offer advice, referral and funds to seek psychological assistance or direct psychological assistance, **usually paired with a relocation project**. Therefore, this is probably **the least developed field in the protection mechanisms offered**. As underlined by Victoria Lavenue,: «there is a lack of funding, there is a lack of information, there is a lack of training, and many journalists contacting us don’t even know that they can ask for support. So we do receive some requests from journalists saying “I would like to see someone because I feel very vulnerable mentally at the moment”».

Finally, what emerges is also the **scarcity of psychologists with professional experience in this specific field**. As recalled by Lavenue: «We can offer financial support so they can pay for a few consultations, but there are not that many professionals aware of the specific threats our journalists are facing».

23 See the 2020 CoE’s report “How to Protect Journalists and Other Media Actors?”  
<https://www.rcmediafreedom.eu/Publications/Reports/How-to-protect-journalists-and-other-media-actors-Implementation-guide>

## 4. The human side of needs and support: solidarity and publicity

The need of psychological support for journalists at risk suggests something: there is a human side in the needs of threatened journalists. Be their problem related to their work precarity, to verbal harassment or to legal charges, **these individuals are not only at risk as professionals, but also as humans**. That is why we want to conclude this research with some hints in this direction, that are directly derived from our interviews.

There are two “less technical” aspects of journalistic support that our respondents would like to see implemented in the future: **more publicity for cases of threats against journalists** and an **increased solidarity among journalists**. To a certain extent, we can say these two aspects are intertwined.

### ***Publicity***

Many interviewees considered it important that their **problems are given visibility and receive different forms of publicity**, that is to say advocacy, support, and solidarity. Among others, the Romanian journalist Marina Constantinoiu stressed the importance of advocating cases of threatened journalists and publicising their instances: «I think that all we can do is only to speak... let's speak louder [...] about the freedom of the media and the right of journalists to gather information and to open doors and ask questions and meet people. I think that this should be underlined more frequently at the high level, European and national. [...] People have to be reminded that journalists are like doctors... It's like a sanitary action for society».

Speaking about **single cases of threatened journalists**, being vocal is important for «**ending the journalist's isolation**, to place him on the scene and to ensure that everyone knows his case», «to build a bridge between journalists and the public opinion» says Andrea Di Pietro, Italian media lawyer for [Ossigeno per l'Informazione](#): that is why the organisation - together with legal support - also offers a sort of “**mediatic escort**”: «information on the trial is disseminated, in conferences, in other journalists' trainings...». Of course, journalists might decide to maintain anonymity for security reasons, however Di Pietro told us that «so far all of them have felt more protected by visibility than the other way around».

Signaling and keeping track of the cases of threatened journalists is exactly the aim of EU-level platforms like [Mapping Media Freedom](#) and the [Platform to promote the protection of journalism](#):

however, «if these alerts are not publicized and then you don't speak about it at a local level, they will remain a formal warning inside an archive than nobody will see», observed our interviewee, journalist Lorenzo Tondo. Therefore, **this work of mapping made by support organisations should also be better publicised**. This kind of service is not always well-known among journalists themselves, while it could be an important reference point especially for local journalists. Firstly, so that they could report the threats and pressure they received firsthand; secondly, in order to push them to write about these issues in the media.

In this sense, one crucial question that should be posed is: **are the media speaking about media freedom?** As Branko Cecen noted, the civil sector working on media freedom (in Serbia, but this is valid also elsewhere in Europe) is tremendously developed, but has been cornered on the Internet, while the most followed media in the country is still television.

«The only way to defend ourselves in the pen» said the Italian journalist Tondo: «The only way to make our voice heard is the information channel». However, the media outlets are sometimes reluctant or inactive: as the German freelancer Luber told us, «regional media, radio or newspapers gave little space to my case. The local newspaper where I worked [before being a freelance] was next to the place [where I was threatened], and I know that the press hesitated to cover it because I criticised the police». If the media are not covering media freedom issues, this means that **«we do not need to look for problems only from outside, but also from inside the journalistic world»**, as suggested by Giulio Vasaturo. Here comes the question of solidarity among journalists.

### ***Solidarity among journalists***

Solidarity is not only a value in itself. It is fundamental to foster solidarity between journalists also to guarantee a higher level of protection.

Very often, it happens that **a media worker who is experiencing an attack feels they have been left alone**. That sense of isolation needs to be countered, and solidarity is the first way to do it: «The support of the journalistic community and the reputation that you have is very important, that's the way you defend yourself most of the time. Integrity is the best defense», our Albanian interviewee Besar Likmeta underlined.

Numerous interviewees denounced the fact that there is **little solidarity among journalists, especially at a local level or inside the same newsroom**. As stressed by the German freelance journalist Beate Luber and the Italian correspondent for The Guardian, Lorenzo Tondo, they found support from other colleagues in other parts of the country or abroad, but not from the members of

their newsrooms for example. The Italian journalist Caponnetto said: «I received solidarity after my boss explicitly supported me: otherwise, I am not sure my colleagues would have openly supported me. They are afraid to be threatened by my same persecutors».

Furthermore, our interviewees outlined that this lack of solidarity is sometimes due to jealousy in response to the “spotlight” enjoyed by threatened journalists. Taking the case of a journalist under **police protection** as an example, it is not uncommon that other journalists perceive that protection as a privilege, a **status recognition or a demonstration of power**. In this sense, the Italian media lawyer Vasaturo and the Italian journalist Scavo suggest that support organisations should intervene by raising journalists’ awareness on what being threatened entails as a professional, as well as in private life.

Moreover, as underlined before (“Verbal harassment” section) **threats to journalists sometimes even come from other journalists and colleagues**. Nikola Marković, for example, said that the majority of attacks in Montenegro come from colleagues working for pro-government outlets: «They write the worst things about us and our families, thus creating an atmosphere in which we are recognised as traitors of our country only because we criticise the government».

Our interviews also collected various **positive examples of solidarity** within the journalistic world that can be inspiring for working on this issue in the future: for example, the journalists we interviewed from Hungary and Serbia stressed the importance of **demonstrating** every time a critical journalist or media outlet is attacked. For example, the Hungarian journalists Daniel Pal Renyi told us that when the government refused to allow critical journalists to press conferences or press events, other media outlets decided not to go too. The Lithuanian journalist also shared with us her positive experience: «There was this initiative of my colleagues who said I should be employed and so it happened in the end, with a full contract. They all knew I otherwise would have left». Being supportive among colleagues also simply means to share experiences: «**Often the psychological support comes from other colleagues**» said the journalist Quentin Raverdy: «Often our life revolves around our work, and how to keep on doing our crazy work. But then everybody has their own life, and professionally it can also be very different... my life is very different from the one of a correspondent for a big newspaper. So it is difficult to meet and speak, so we feel alone and isolated, we think we are the only ones with little money and little time».

In this sense, **solidarity can also be built during relocation programmes**: Suzan Goes, working on relocation programmes in the Netherlands, believes that one of the most important effects of the training offered to journalists in residence is the fact that they spend time together and can

share their stories, building long-lasting relationships. Finally, **solidarity should be fostered also on a European level**: the Greek journalist Dr. Papadopoulou stressed the importance of «feeling that you are part of a larger European community of media professionals. [...] This sense of isolation, this feeling that you are alone with a monster that has the resources, the time, the power to deal with you. I think that if we manage to create a sense of community among media professionals in Europe that would be definitely a very good step». Moreover, as outlined by Irina Nedeva, sometimes the issues journalists face are not local but global (e.g., international organised crime, transnational ownership of the media). Therefore, an “**internationalisation of the media issues**” is required, where international actions are essential to publicise instances and share information.

## 4. Recommendations

The needs of European journalists emerged in this research and the panorama of existing forms of support and of their gaps lead to some final considerations and recommendations for the future work of the MFRR consortium, the single member organisations and other media freedom stakeholders around Europe.

First, it is important to acknowledge the risk of creating a «**media freedom bubble**». Many interviewees stressed their **difficulties in finding the resources** that are offered (e.g. training) **and support services** (e.g. pro bono legal assistance) because they are not aware of the existence of many of the organisations working in the field; additionally, the dispersion of information online makes it time consuming to look for such services. Therefore, an **improvement in collecting and communicating the existing services is required**, in order to better reach out to the potential beneficiaries of training and support services.

Among the services offered to menaced journalists, the field that requires **more investment** is that of **psychological support**: it should be offered during relocation programmes, but the single media freedom organisations should also more actively think about including it among their services.

**The precarisation of journalists is a major issue**: for this reason, more work should be done on **freelancers, local and women journalists**.

With regard to **legal assistance and training**, they should be more focused or better connected with a **local dimension**: as for legal assistance, it should be available in different languages, at least in English, along with the local language. This aspect is particularly important given the specialisation required for navigating through national legal provisions. As for training, the language element is again important, together with a greater focus on local issues which might vary from one country to another.

In this sense, there is space for media freedom organisations to act as a **bridge between the European and the local level**, strengthening the relations with grassroots organisations but also raising awareness at the local level about the EU's work in the field of media freedom.

In general, it can be said that **developments should be oriented to strengthen the existing support services, especially on a local level**.

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## List of interviewees

*Caponnetto Angela*, journalist at RaiNews24 (public broadcaster) (Italy), February 23, 2021

*Čečen Branko*, Director of the Investigative Center CINS (Serbia), October 27, 2020

*Constantinoiu Marina*, Editor in chief of *Editia de Dimineață* (Romania), November 10, 2020

*Di Pietro Andrea*, lawyer of Ossigeno per l'Informazione (Italy), October 12, 2020

*Escribano Esperanza*, freelance journalist and BBC correspondent (Spain), March 3, 2021

*Forsberg Kersti*, Director of Fojo Media Institute (Sweden), October 26, 2020

*Georgievski Dejan*, President of the Media Development Center (North Macedonia), October 19, 2020

*Goes Suzan*, Programme coordinator of Justice and Peace's Shelter City initiative (The Netherlands), October 23, 2020

*Lithuanian journalist* (anonymised), February 25, 2021

*Lavenue Victoria*, Director of the Assistance Desk of Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) (France), October 26, 2020

*Leković Saša*, investigative journalist (Croatia), October 19, 2020

*Likmeta Besar*, Editor in chief of Reporter.al (Albania), November 10, 2020

*Luber Beate Josefina*, freelance journalist (Germany), October 23, 2020

*Marković Nikola*, President of the Commission for Monitoring Investigation of Attacks on Journalists of Montenegro (Montenegro), October 20, 2020

*Nedeva Irina*, President of the Association of European Journalists Bulgaria, (Bulgaria) November 6, 2020

*Papadopoulou Lambrini*, journalist of Documento (Greece), November 9, 2020

*Phillips Gill*, Director of editorial legal services for The Guardian (UK), November 23, 2020

*Pal Renyi Daniel*, investigative journalist for 444.hu (Hungary), November 16, 2020

*Ravedry Quentin*, freelance journalist (France/Italy), February 23, 2021

*Scavo Nello*, journalist of L'Avvenire (Italy), October 21, 2020

*Tondo Lorenzo*, journalist of The Guardian-Italian correspondent (Italy/UK), November 6, 2020

*Vasaturo Giulio*, lawyer of Federazione Nazionale Stampa Italiana (FNSI- Italian Press Federation), October 13, 2020

*Venckutė Akvilė*, Communication and Project Manager at Lithuanian Journalism Center (Lithuania), March 4, 2021

*Vujović Oliver*, Director of the South East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO), November 5, 2020

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