



2016 Annual Report

BIRN NETWORK VISIBILITY, REACH and IMPACT

BIRN strives to empower people to access their rights by providing accurate and relevant information and creating opportunities for them to participate in democratic processes.

Through high-quality reporting and by creating a pool of skilled journalists, BIRN examines and scrutinises key processes, steers debates and provides the public with impartial and reliable information.

The BIRN Network also monitors and advocates for the transparency and accountability of public institutions and enables civil society organisations, CSOs, and citizens to influence decision-makers.

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Social and Political Context; Media Freedom

All countries in the Western Balkan region, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, which became the most recent to officially apply for EU membership in February 2016, are actively engaged in reform efforts to become members of the European Union. Although greater political stability has provided possibilities for increased economic growth and decreased levels of conflict, regional development is characterized by high levels of unemployment, rising inequality, rural underdevelopment, widespread corruption and malfunctioning public administrations and judicial systems.

Both within this process and within the wider process of democratization of the entire region, CSOs facilitate participation and dialogue with local and national authorities, advocate and promote reforms in these fields and monitor the performance of local and national government. However, advancements are uneven and sporadic, results fragile, legitimacy and representativeness sometimes weak and there is a need to further support efforts to institutionalize and strengthen civil society in this regard.

Serbia finds itself in a dangerous position economically, defined by poor management of public finances, endangering the socioeconomic rights of citizens. In Kosovo, unemployment levels are unsustainable, leading to high levels of poverty for particularly underrepresented groups such as women, youth and minorities. Despite recent positive developments, Albania has been unable to bring down corruption and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the structure of the state paralyzes development and hinders reconciliation. In addition, Kosovo is struggling with persistent inter-ethnic conflicts, similar to Bosnia and Herzegovina, which shows dangerous tendencies towards regression in this regard.

The international conventions on human rights have been ratified in most countries and respect for human rights is legally protected. The implementation of these laws however is lacking. Political, cultural and socio-economic rights are frequently not respected, especially related to labour rights, and systems of sanctions are missing.

Underrepresented groups, such as the Roma community, face discrimination at all levels of society; they lack access to education and proper housing, and are excluded from participating in public decision making. Workers' possibilities to organise in the workplace are circumscribed by both threats and unlawful dismissals by employers, high unemployment rates and the spread of precarious work practices.

The widespread corruption in the region further endangers the quality of judicial institutions and the right to access to justice. Overall, the often low levels of citizens' engagement, the weak legitimacy and capacities of CSOs, corruption, poverty, unemployment, gender inequality, lack of respect for labour rights, and citizens' general lack of trust in institutions, all constitute threats to democratic development and stability in the region. They are crucial components of a functioning democratic society that

respects the rights of its citizens as well as sustained and secure development.

Women, youth, ethnic minorities, the Roma community and LGBT people remain underrepresented to a large extent. These groups also suffer most from the unequal power structures that persist in the region.

The development of a free media has either come to a halt or is in reverse across the Western Balkans. Although each country has a specific media landscape, the region as a whole is characterised by similar challenges and deficiencies. With democracy assessed as declining in the region for the sixth year in a row, Freedom House's 2016 Nations in Transit report suggests prioritising the objective of media independence at national and EU level, along with the rule of law and good governance, in the search for a sustainable solution.

In its country reports, the European Union warns of limitations to media freedom in the countries of the region, which all want to join the EU.

In **Serbia**, the EU said, conditions for the full exercise of freedom of expression continue to be lacking. More consistent efforts are needed to ensure full implementation of the media laws.

In **Albania**, the overall environment is generally conducive to the exercise of freedom of expression, but implementation remains a challenge even in areas where there is a sound legal basis.

Political pressure and intimidation towards journalists, including physical and verbal attacks, continued in 2016 in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, without appropriate judicial follow-up, while there was no attempt to address the issue of the lack of transparency of media ownership.

In **Kosovo**, threats and attacks against journalists have increased. There were no legislative developments on the regulation of media ownership and transparency. Implementation of legislation remains a challenge, in particular with regard to the law on the public broadcaster.

In **Macedonia**, freedom of expression and the situation of the media remain a serious challenge in the current political climate. Overall, democracy and the rule of law continue to be challenged, in particular due to the capture of institutions such as judicial bodies, regulatory agencies and media outlets.

In the Balkans, investigative journalism has increasingly moved to online media, according to analysts of the media scene in the region. The work of BIRN mainly falls into that category, but also includes TV production, journalism training, and advocacy initiatives, creating databases, developing partnerships with CSOs, and reporting on vulnerable groups.

This annual report will present the entire range of BIRN's activities across the region from the perspectives of *visibility, reach and impact*. In this way, we intend to show the scope and significance of the Network's endeavours: for audiences in the countries of the region and beyond, media professionals, academics, policy makers (in the region and in international organisations), for the civil society sector, and for vulnerable groups. BIRN journalists and film-makers have also received awards for their work in their respective countries and internationally, and the report will also provide information about this.

Reach and Republications

In 2016, BIRN's articles were widely republished in their countries of publication and within the region.

The trend of BIRN stories being republished and quoted by media in the region and all over the world continued over the year. Many of the BIRN stories international media referred to are from 2016 (and sometimes before that).

Case study: Weapons Story

A year-long investigation into the arms trade by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project has been followed up in 35 different countries, with more than 500 republications.

The report, which was published alongside The Guardian newspaper, brought global attention to how weapons and ammunition were flowing from Eastern European countries to governments backing Syria's armed opposition, Islamist groups and ISIS. Through detailed analysis of flight data, export statistics, social media accounts in the Middle East, interviews with officials and confidential arms contracts, BIRN and OCCRP unpicked the route taken by weapons heading to the conflict zone. Reporters from 12 countries have worked on the stories to date.

The investigation also sparked reactions from heads of states, foreign ministers and arms companies which sought to defend the lucrative but controversial trade with the Middle East.

As well as featuring widely across newspapers, online and television bulletins in the Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe, the story was covered by a host of respected international outlets such as Liberation, France; Suddeutsche Zeitung, Germany; state broadcaster NRK in Norway and Haarezt in Israel; France Internationale, and a number of local radio and television stations.

The investigation was published as part of the Follow the Paper Trail project, supported by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA), the operational unit of the Austrian Development Cooperation.

The International Journalists' Network published an article about the making of the story, with tips for journalists based on the report.

Here are some of the most significant facts:

In 2016, **BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina** articles had 12,581 republications; a record, and more than double to the previous year, when 6,744 republications were recorded. The exclusive interview with Radovan Karadzic, entitled "I Expect to be Acquitted", attracted huge public attention. It was republished 243 times and was read on the BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina website alone 5,900 times. While in The Hague, BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina journalists gave live statements for regional and international media, such as Sky News and BBC News. An analysis entitled "Arabs Marry Bosnian Women to Establish Parallel Families" published in June had a great reach in the country – it was republished 169 times, caused lots of discussion and sparked other media to investigate the same topic. The article also prompted the most viewed regional TV news station N1, a CNN affiliate, to film its own footage on the "buying" of Bosnian wives and of sexual services by Arab tourists.

Many journalists, experts and CSOs have been using the facts and figures from **BIRN Macedonia's** database "Skopje 2014 Uncovered" as a resource for their stories and events, including leading international media outlets like the New York Times, which published a story on Skopje 2014. Providing accurate data to the public about the cost of Skopje 2014, it has resulted in the creation of numerous pictures and graphics shared on social media, as well as other public reactions. Skopje 2014 came back into the public eye in September 2016, when its total cost rose to 667 million euros as a result of the construction of a new building for the National Bank.

BIRN Macedonia produced and published numerous investigations, analyses and other articles related to the political crisis in the country via its online publication Prizma in 2016. Prizma has become the most relevant source for in-depth investigations and is frequently quoted and its stories republished by many local newspapers and mainstream media. As a result of this, BIRN Macedonia expended its audience and impact. With its live blog coverage during the turbulent events in April (when the pardoning of many Macedonian politicians on April 12 sparked massive protests across the country), BIRN Macedonia additionally positioned the Prizma website as a trustful and relevant source of

information. The trend continued with the live coverage of the elections in December 2016. This resulted in a further increase to its readership.

The documentary film 'The Unidentified', produced by the **Balkan Transitional Justice Programme**, filmed in 2015, was screened at seven film festivals in 2016, and at 10 debates and lectures. The film has reached an estimated one million people via its broadcasts on Al Jazeera Balkans.

Since the beginning of 2017, some of the most prestigious media around the globe have quoted or republished articles from BIRN's flagship publication **Balkan Insight**, reaffirming its position as a source of trusted news from the Balkans for an international audience. The *New York Times* has included several Balkan Insight stories in its overview of European affairs since December 2016.

Balkan Insight stories are regularly featured in the BBC News website's News From Elsewhere section.

Politico.eu also regularly refers to Balkan Insight articles in overviews of European news.

A story about the notorious architectural makeover of Skopje, Architects of Modernist Skopje Decry Retrograde Remodel, published as part of the 2016 Fellowship for Journalistic Excellence, was presented on the *ArchDaily* website, which attracts 10 million visits every month, on the first day of 2017.

Another controversial urban reconstruction topic from the region, the Belgrade Waterfront project, gained international attention in a Forbes story published in December 2016, which referred to the Balkan Insight report about the eviction of the last family living in the area.

Several recent *Council of Europe* digest reports about corruption also referenced articles published by Balkan Insight. The latest country report on Bosnia and Herzegovina by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, the human rights monitoring body of the Council of Europe, also repeatedly cites articles from Balkan Insight published from 2013 to 2016. The articles include pieces dealing with hate speech, elections, the schooling system, incidents that sparked ethnic tensions, attacks on the LGBT community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and problems with releasing census data due to political disputes.

TV Production

BIRN's media production is largely online-based, however there is a considerable amount of TV production related to reporting and discussing current news, to issues of transitional justice and to investigative journalism. These productions ensure that topics rarely represented in local media are aired and audiences beyond those reading online media are reached.

BIRN Kosovo's flagship programmes are 'Life in Kosovo' and 'Justice in Kosovo'. 'Life in Kosovo' produced 39 episodes in 2016 - the most-watched current affairs programme in the country, broadcast on the Kosovo public television station, RTK - while there were 36 episodes of 'Justice in Kosovo'. Both have high visibility and importance in Kosovo media and discuss topics of vital importance for Kosovo society on a weekly basis. The programmes often have significant social and political impact in the country and raise awareness of important, often controversial issues.

One recent example came in December 2016, when after reports of abuse of tax reached Kallxo.com, 'Life in Kosovo' broadcast a series of three episodes titled 'Organized Tax Theft' which revealed findings of a whistle-blower who works as an inspector in the Tax Administration. Murat Mehmeti, the whistle-blower, reported that over 200 companies had evaded taxes, and that they owe the Kosovo budget millions of euros. After Mehmeti started questioning the irregularities at the Tax Administration, people in managing positions started transferring him from one position to the other so that he would not make the information public. This programme, split into three episodes, caused the State Prosecution, the Special Prosecution, the Tax Administration and the Ministry of Finance to have a meeting to discuss what they should do next, but so far, no concrete measures have been taken. Mehmeti received support mainly from the international community, such as foreign ambassadors and the EU law mission EULEX, but also from Kosovo's civil society. He was given the 'Civic Bravery' award by Levizja FOL, because even though he was being threatened for what he had said, he had the courage to come out and speak publicly.

BIRN Macedonia produced four investigations during 2016 in partnership with the KOD Investigative TV programme. The investigations were aired in the period between April and June 2016, on the national TV broadcaster, Telma TV, on Sunday at prime time after the evening news. Apart from revealing many wrongdoings in the public sector, misuse of power, and failures in delivery of public services, the investigations produced with KOD also increased the visibility of and enhanced cooperation with other CSOs by having them in almost each televised investigation, speaking as experts on some of the topics that were covered.

BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina's 'TV Justice' programme provided comprehensive coverage of war crime trials at the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the reporting

period, the 'TV Justice' team recorded 12 episodes, covering war crimes cases and stories portraying all sorts of post-conflict issues and problems faced by people in the country. BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina was seeking to keep the audience aware of importance of dealing with the past and talking about what happened in order to prevent any new escalations of hatred and violence.

New Publishing Initiatives

In a year in which there was widespread debate around the world about fake news and when fact-checking journalism recorded growing popularity, a new fact-checking initiative was launched by BIRN in Kosovo, while another new BIRN initiative focused on investigating online violent extremism, also a vital topic in the media worldwide. In addition, BIRN started a new security-related publishing initiative about the Black Sea region.

Kallxo.com and 'Life in Kosovo' - both **BIRN Kosovo** platforms - launched the first tool in the country rating the truthfulness of public officials' statements. The purpose of the Krypometer is to check the statements of political figures on issues of major local, national or international importance.

In late 2016, **BIRN Hub**, in cooperation with Commission for International Justice and Accountability, established a pool of journalists from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia, who will be engaged in the production of 10 investigative reports related to the topic of online violent extremism, a topic which is increasingly in focus both regionally and globally. The first two stories deal with state responses to combating violent extremism online in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia ,and with dealing with the recruitment techniques of the extremists in the Balkans to lure people to fight in wars in the Middle East. Other stories will be pitched and published later in 2017.

BIRN Romania resumed its activities in 2016 with a project entitled Reporting Security in the Black Sea Area. Articles related to regional security issues, energy, military, migration and reconciliation are being published on Balkan Insight, as well as on newly-launched Romanian online publication www.Sinopsis.info.ro, which publishes not only the articles from the project but also stories related to security in the Balkans and the Black Sea area in general. With this, BIRN spread the scope of its activities beyond the Balkans, as a logical continuation of its work over the last 11 years.

BIRN work referenced in books

Balkan Insight has been quoted and referenced in dozens of books published over the years around the world, including works issued by leading academic publishing houses, covering political and social issues of importance for the region.

Most of them referred to *transitional justice*.

Balkan Insight was also used as a reference in publications related to *EU integration processes, democratic governance and institutions, human and minority rights, and sociological analysis*, amongst other topics.

Mentions in Reports by International Organisations, Policy Papers and Academic Publications; BIRN's Contribution to Improving the Media Landscape in the Balkans

BIRN is often featured in reports by international organisations studying the media environment in the region. Academics also refer to BIRN investigations and analyses. Through its analyses and surveys, BIRN makes a direct contribution to the study of media policies and practice in this part of Europe.

As a result of its continuous reporting on important topics in the country, **BIRN Albania's** work has influenced and shaped some of the most important reports written by international organisations. One of the most important documents for the country was the draft resolution prepared by the Rapporteur for Albania, Knut Fleckenstein, in which the European Parliament expressed concerns regarding media freedom and attacks on BIRN Albania, as well as about the widespread censorship in local media.

Other reports that recognise BIRN's work in terms of media freedom and anti-corruption/transparency initiatives are the IREX MSI report for 2015 and the most recent Freedom House 'Nations in Transit' report.

The media commission in Albania's parliament held a hearing on January 25, 2016, dedicated to BIRN Albania's study 'A Blind Eye on News: Self-Censorship in the Albanian Media'. The key findings of the study on the frequency, roots and causes of self-censorship in the local media were presented to the commission by BIRN Albania's editor Besar Likmeta, who underlined that data collected through the survey of 121 journalists and 22 in-depth interviews with key sources suggests that self-censorship is widespread in the Albanian media.

The hearing was called by the media commission in order to assess the working conditions, job security and safety of journalists in Albania – issues that are also reflected in the study. The MPs praised the quality of the report and discussed ways in which the parliamentary commission could be more active in order to improve the working conditions of Albanian journalists. They discussed the recommendations produced by the report, focusing on ways to improve the implementation of the labour code by media

outlets as well as methods to increase transparency and fairness in the distribution of government-sponsored advertising. The findings of the same report were also included in the draft resolution prepared by Rapporteur Knut Fleckenstein, where the European Parliament expressed concern about the widespread censorship in the local media.

BIRN was also mentioned in reports from the European Federation of Journalists, Reporters without Borders, and Human Rights Watch.

BIRN Serbia invested a lot of its efforts in advocating media freedom, responding to the growing censorship and self-censorship and the dramatic overall shrinkage of public space for critical reporting and public deliberation. Through research, policy papers, public debates and intensive online campaigns, BIRN revealed the systemic abuse of public money in the media sector and failures in the application of new media laws, censorship and 'soft censorship', and the low quality of reporting, especially during elections.

Its 'Soft Censorship Report' raised awareness of one of the most effective types of censorship in the Serbian media sector, resulting from the non-transparent and uncontrolled allocation of budgetary funds. The report represents unique reading in the Serbian media sector, as it looks into several methods and financial instruments used to exercise official 'soft' censorship – rewarding those supportive of the government and punishing those critical of it. The report concludes that public tenders for support of production of quality media content and media privatization, being the key novelties of new media legislation, failed to provide a genuine breakthrough in budgetary practices. On the contrary, governing bodies actively bypassed or abused the provisions of laws, continuing with the same practice of controlling media through state money.

During 2016, 11 policy briefs were produced, evaluating quality of content produced with budgetary money. BIRN Serbia research provided data-driven input and policy outreach, mapping weak spots in the implementation of the Law on Public Information and Media and the project-based budgetary model. This evaluation is one-of-a-kind in Serbia, responding to a systemic failure in which this type of evaluation is completely missing, along with the proper planning of consequent project cycles.

Balkan Insight's focus page entitled Balkan Media Watch publishes regular news and analysis about media developments in the region. These articles are often republished by publications specialising in media topics.

BIRN Network staff are often invited to speak at national and international conferences and to give interviews explaining the media context in their countries. For example, in December 2016, BIRN regional director Gordana Igric told Deutsche Welle about attacks on free speech in the Balkans and that press freedom ceased to exist in Serbia long ago. Human Rights Watch backed Igric's claims with official statistics from the Independent Journalist Association of Serbia (NUNS), the article said. Figures show that, in the first seven months of this year alone, there were 33 attacks on journalists in Serbia, including physical attacks, threats and intimidation, it said. In November, BIRN was also featured in

Al Jazeera English's weekly 'Listening Post' media programme as part of a report on alleged censorship in Serbia. The report dealt with alleged government control of the press in Serbia, as well as with the financial and professional challenges that newsrooms and journalists in the country face.

BIRN's Social Media Pages Grow in Popularity

BIRN's social media pages have increased their numbers of followers significantly, boosting the reach of the stories that BIRN is publishing and heightening public engagement.

As an illustration, we present the cases of BIRN's regional publications: Balkan Insight and Balkan Transitional Justice (BTJ):

The Facebook page of Balkan Insight, BIRN's regional publication, had five times more followers in January 2017 than in November 2014, when the latest grant from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs supporting this digital outlet began.

Balkan Insight's Twitter page currently has 23,441 followers, while in November 2014 it had a total of 7,556 - an increase of 330 per cent.

Balkan Transitional Justice (BTJ), another BIRN regional programme, has also recorded an important increase in its social media following.

Its Facebook page has 20,611 followers in total, while at beginning of that period it had 13,000 - an increase of 159 per cent.

BTJ's followers on Twitter also increased by 314 per cent, from an initial 1,250 to a current total of 3,926.

Balkan Insight's social media followers come from around the region and from further afield - mostly the United States and Britain.

Emma Krstic, BIRN's social media editor, said the organisation had been working to develop and deepen its engagement on social networks.

"In the past 12 months we have introduced more live coverage of events, namely elections and protests, which we covered on social media and through live blogs, and started to produce more video content," said Krstic.

"Additionally, over the past year, numerous milestones and historic events across the region such as the war crimes verdict against former Bosnian Serb political leader Radovan Karadzic and Kosovo winning its first-ever Olympic gold medal and its first-ever Oscar nomination for a foreign film, have helped us to grow our audience organically," she added.

"Our content inspires a steady stream of comment and debate, which at times becomes quite heated among our social media community. We aim to facilitate interesting and

healthy debate, but covering a region with such a turbulent recent history can evoke a very passionate reaction from our followers on social media which requires a lot of moderation,” she said.

Training

In 2016, BIRN organised journalism training throughout the region, in variety of forms: summer school, seminars, on-the job training, and training sessions combined with calls for investigative stories, thus contributing to raising the professional capacities of journalists at various stages of their careers.

BIRN Hub’s Summer School of Investigative Reporting BIRN Summer School

combines: capacity building (training of journalists in investigative skills); demonstration in practice and leading by example (production of investigative projects followed by media outlets); and cross-border collaboration at all levels. The trainers were some of the most well-known and awarded investigative journalists and editors, such as Martin Kaiser, a triple Pulitzer Prize winner for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Miranda Patrucic, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project’s regional editor and investigator, Crina Boros, a trainer from the Centre for Investigative Journalism, Paul Myers, an expert in social media-based research, Jim Mintz, a private investigator and Columbia Journalism School lecturer, and Lawrence Marzouk, BIRN’s investigative editor. Sessions were designed especially to address the needs of experienced journalists. Each day, participants had the opportunity for one-on-one or small group sessions with the trainers. In December 2016, **BIRN Romania** organised a training seminar for journalists from three countries in the Black Sea region - Bulgaria, Moldova and Romania - entitled ‘Reporting Security in the Black Sea Area’. Its aim was to raise awareness of regional security issues, by promoting best practices in terms of reporting on issues such as energy, military, migration and reconciliation.

All the training sessions organised by **BIRN Albania** were followed by calls for investigations. This meant that all the information delivered was applied in practice during the mentoring phase. This kind of on-the-job training, from selecting a story until its publication, allowed participants to increase not just knowledge, but also their hands-on capacities, which can be later used in their everyday reporting in local media. As an example of how this can be successful in practice, one of the journalists trained last year using the same process was awarded the first prize in the EU Investigative Journalism Award 2016 for Albania.

Training sessions organised by **BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina** focused on new technologies, social networks, video editing, online analytical systems, investigative journalism and legal issues in journalism. Training was conducted to empower journalists

to follow the work of the judiciary in the field of the rule of law (organised crime, corruption and terrorism, as well as monitoring of regular judicial work). As a result, BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina journalists were prepared to expand their area of work and expertise, conducting research and writing analysis articles and news stories on new topics.

BIRN Macedonia contributed towards developing and strengthening the investigative reporting skills of more than 70 journalists in 2016. Through various training sessions, editorial and mentorship programmes and study visits, journalists were trained in key techniques of investigative reporting and some of them mentored in applying these skills in their work.

Company and Consultancy

In 2016, the new [website of BIRN Consultancy](#) was launched as part of an effort to continue developing the consulting arm of BIRN Ltd. The website seeks to raise the visibility of BIRN Consultancy, as well as to make potential clients aware of the range of services offered by the new consultancy service.

BIRN Consultancy is an independent analysis, advisory and corporate investigation consultancy with a regional focus on the Balkans. Its analysts monitor and examine a wide range of political, economic, security, social and human rights developments within their countries.

This knowledge is then turned into the insights that are provided to clients. Products range from standardised monitoring of political, economic and security events and trends in the region to more in-depth, bespoke reporting tailored to a client's specific needs.

Impact of BIRN's Work: Media, Social and Political Scene

Despite the unfavourable environment for free and professional media publishing in the region, in particular for investigative journalism, BIRN's work had an impact in countries across the Balkans. Here are some examples:

After **BIRN Serbia** published a series of investigations about problems with the accreditation of higher education institutions, the Commission for Accreditation and Quality Control announced the suspension of accreditations and a review of procedures. The government's Anti-corruption Council, in its report on the state of the judiciary in Serbia, highlighted the non-transparent work of notaries based on data obtained through BIRN's investigation into notaries.

The contract for renting the historic Geozavod building as part of the controversial

Belgrade Waterfront redevelopment project was made public and changed following the publication of a BIRN Serbia investigation which proved that state does not have control over its assets.

BIRN Serbia's Participative Budgeting (PB) programme was implemented in 10 Serbian municipalities, with the results incorporated in budget laws for 2016. More than 15,000 citizens directly participated in the process of budgeting through structured pre-budget consultations. The overall goal of the action was to provide mechanisms for public participation in decision-making. The majority of local councils involved in the project expressed readiness to continue with the practice of including citizens in the budgeting process. Seven local councils also carried out consultations for budgets of 2017, with assistance of local CSOs and BIRN.

BIRN Albania published an investigation on Ministry of Transportation plans to award a local company a concessionary agreement for new car licence plates for a price of 95 million euro and a period of 35 years. The new plates would cost every driver 48 euros. Following the publication of the story, which led to public uproar, the plan was scrapped. After BIRN Albania published an investigation that revealed that Albania planned to lease an arms factory in the southern town of Polican to a Bulgarian company linked previously with organised crime, the plan was scrapped and the Economy Ministry promised to probe the allegations.

In June, the mayor of Kavaja, Elvis Rroshi, who BIRN reported as having a criminal background in Switzerland, was arrested after the allegations were found to be true. Rroshi was detained for falsifying an integrity form on which public officials are required to disclose criminal records. In December, after a full investigation by the prosecutor's office, the Central Electoral Commission revoked his mandate as mayor.

In August, BIRN Albania published an investigation about how the interests of a private company that sought a monopoly in the Tirana recycling market were behind Tirana mayor's Erion Veliq campaign to stop individual Roma recyclers from collecting trash. On the day the story was published, a 17-year-old employee of the company died after being crushed by a digger in its recycling plant inside the city's landfill site. In a follow-up investigation in August, BIRN Albania revealed how the teenager who died was an undocumented worker and the plant lacked basic safety rules. The investigations were republished by many online media, but the largest newspaper didn't republish them due to interests related to the mayor of Tirana. In reaction to that, the second most influential online media outlet Lapsi published three editorial pieces on how the media censored BIRN. Even the statements of the opposition were not transmitted by some TV stations, as they referred to the BIRN investigation. Nevertheless, the investigations opened up a lot of public debate on the issue and were the most discussed news of the month in the Albanian media.

From the Adriatic to the Black Sea, from Palermo to Plovdiv, the 2016 fellows of **BIRN Hub's** programme, the **Balkan Fellowship for Journalistic Excellence (BFJE)**, travelled

widely to tell the stories of how trust (the 2016 theme topic) can be shaken, squandered, misplaced and sometimes restored. They interviewed octogenarian architects, witnesses to war crimes, mafia prosecutors, drug smugglers, care workers, vigilantes, doctors, police officers and, of course, politicians.

A BFJE alumna from 2015, Laura Stefanut from Romania, who was covering the problem of garment factories in Romania and Bulgaria involved in illegal practices which do not comply with the labour law, was sued by one of the factories after revealing how the workers were exploited. After the supplying evidence to the court, with the full support of the BFJE team and a campaign launched by media groups and organisations for the protection of labour rights, the lawsuit was withdrawn. Based on Stefanut's investigation, the Labour Inspectorate issued three fines to the factory mentioned in the story.

An evaluation of the BFJE programme on its tenth anniversary, carried out by Brankica Petkovic, Researcher and Project Manager at the Peace Institute, Institute for Contemporary Social and Political Studies in Ljubljana, concluded that the programme has been highly valuable for the journalists who have had the opportunity to participate in it so far.

“For almost all individual fellows interviewed within our review, participation in the BFJE has been a milestone in their professional growth and careers. It has crucially influenced the way they work in and perceive their own profession,” the review said.

“They speak of the emancipatory influence of the program on them, about expanded horizons and skills, a changed mind-set and spirit, greater openness for cross-border journalism and their own positioning among journalists of the world,” it added.

The evaluation included semi-structured interviews with 26 relevant stakeholders, including 14 former fellows, but also with members of the fellowship implementation structure, as well as external observers such as editors and media experts.

It stressed that there is considerable evidence of the impact of the BFJE's stories on society –increasing public awareness, initiating public debates and even changing policy.

“In some cases, the stories have even directly affected people's lives, enabling them, for instance, to initiate legal battles for justice. Some stories led to follow-ups, either by the same journalist after the fellowship programme, or by other journalists in the region but also in international media,” the evaluation states.

Weapons investigations produced as part of **BIRN Hub's** and **BIRN Kosovo's** project **A Paper Trail to Better Governance** provoked significant reactions in the region and beyond it. The investigation also sparked reactions from heads of states and foreign ministers (in Serbia, Bulgaria and Montenegro) and from arms companies. The [EU's diplomatic service](#) said it was looking into the findings of the BIRN and OCCRP investigation into how Central and Eastern Europe weapons are flooding the battlefields of Syria. The [opposition in Germany questioned Berlin's role](#) in the Middle East arms trade following the reports. This issue is likely to remain on the public radar, particularly

as BIRN plans follow-up pieces. Civil society organisations working in the same field also expressed interest in BIRN's investigations, getting in contact to exchange information. The facts revealed by BIRN helped other stakeholders to fulfil their watchdog mission and continue to hold the government accountable.

After **BIRN Kosovo's** publication Kallxo.com reported in November 2016 about several villas that had been built in a national park where the state had publicly pledged to protect the mountains, a criminal complaint was filed to the police on behalf of the residents of the village near the national park.

Kallxo.com reported in October 2016 that the Basic Courts in Kosovo had violated the constitutional rights of more than 8,000 citizens, by wrongfully sentencing them to prison for misdemeanours. (The Kosovo constitution states that prison sentences can be given out only for criminal charges, not for misdemeanours; however, the Basic Courts had been handing out prison sentences for misdemeanours based on a law from the 1970s, which contradicts the constitution). After Kallxo.com reported this, the Appeals Court ordered all courts to stop imposing prison sentences for misdemeanours.

Two prosecutors resigned after it was revealed by BIRN Kosovo that they were engaged in corruption. The first prosecutor was caught dining with the accused in a case he was prosecuting. The second one was caught asking for bribes from the accused. The two prosecutors were investigated by the disciplinary prosecutor, and an indictment was raised against one of them.

BIRN Kosovo organised a number of public debates in municipalities around Kosovo, which in several cases brought tangible changes to the lives of people in those communities afterwards - for example, in the municipality of Obiliq, a project to install a pavement and public lighting started after the debate; in the municipality of Vushtrri, the water factory finally started working as the mayor has long promised; in the municipality of Lipjan, the mayor fulfilled a promise that work on building the Sami Kelmendi stadium would start in spring.

BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina has continued working with and publishing information about the victims of the 1992-95 war. During 2016, BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina interviewed 14 individuals and 15 victims' representatives. BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina interviewed five members of the Salafi community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and foreign fighters who came back from Syria. Two Bosnian women married to Arab men told their stories about being second or third wives. Five people from the Roma community, former soldiers in the war, also told their stories. In this way, voices that are rarely heard voices in public are given a platform, contributing to the plurality of media scene and the understanding of the social context in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

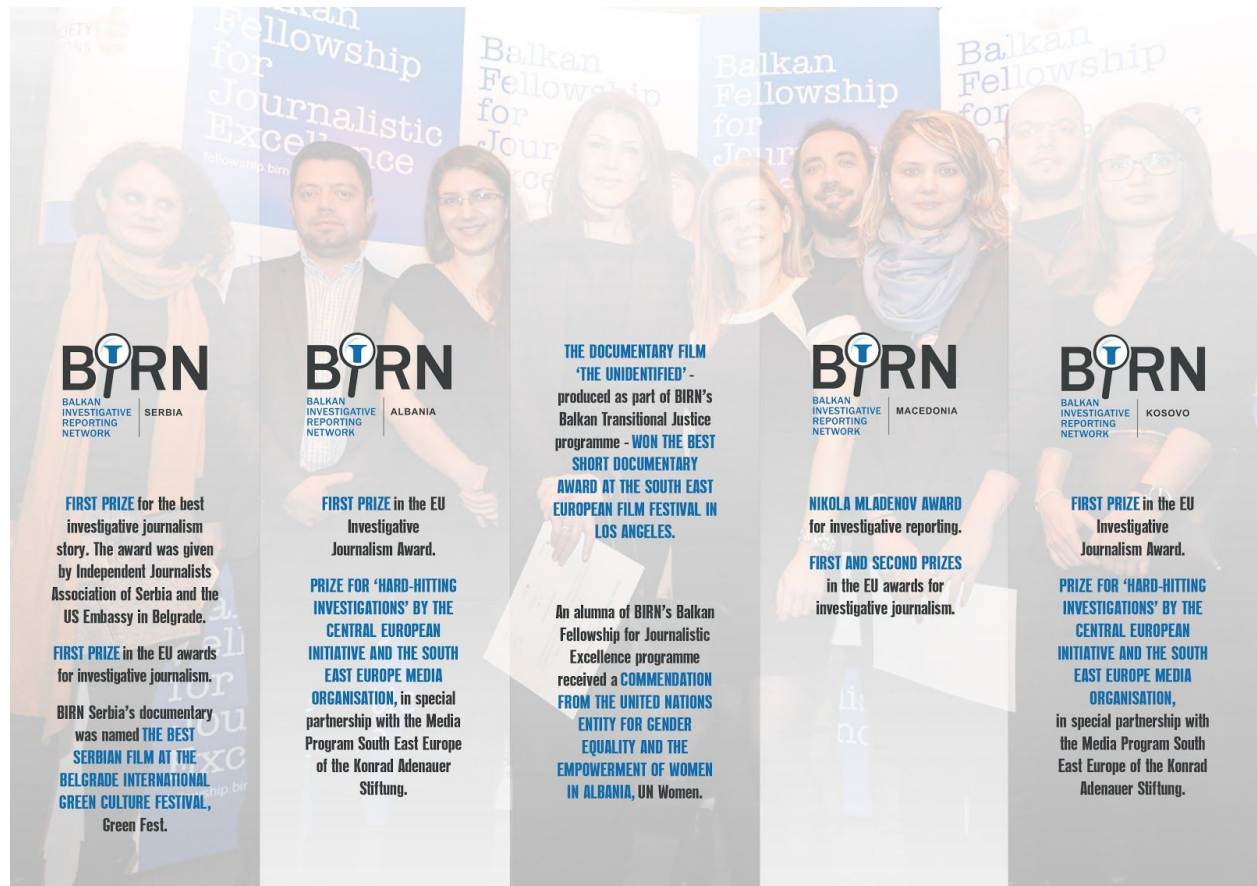
BIRN Macedonia's database on governmental agricultural subsidies was launched as part of the Project for Investigative Journalism and Cooperation between Media and Civil Society. The database contains data on government agricultural subsidies from 2010 to 2014. By using the data presented in the database, and making cross references with

other statistical data available from public institutions, BIRN Macedonia revealed dubious chains of beneficiaries among the recipients of subsidies, from private companies to individuals registered as farmers. Additional investigations on the topic of agricultural subsidies were published after the launch of the database. Vlatko Stojanovski, a journalist from Fokus weekly political magazine, who was using data from this database, later received an award for best investigation from the Institute for Democracy 'Societas Civilis' for his story. The database remains a resource for many other journalists.

Another series of BIRN Macedonia investigations, focused on offshore companies owned by Macedonian businesspeople, in most of the cases close to the government or the ruling party, was published in the first six months of 2016. BIRN's investigation revealed that the current CEO of Macedonian Telecom was the owner of one of the most controversial offshore capital companies. The most public attention was triggered by the investigation that revealed the involvement of the current vice-president of the government in a Cyprus based offshore company, in which he acts as a director, showing a clear conflict of interest. The story published on Prizma was republished and quoted in more than 20 predominantly Albanian-language media.

Journalistic Awards

BIRN journalists won 13 awards in 2016.



Journalists from the BIRN Network won prestigious national awards in their own countries and a number of international awards in 2016.

An alumna of BIRN's Balkan Fellowship for Journalistic Excellence programme received a commendation from the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in Albania, UN Women, for the "creation of a professional model of investigative journalism for the reporting on trafficking of women and girls".

BIRN Macedonia journalists won the prestigious Nikola Mladenov award for investigative reporting for the Skopje 2014 Uncovered database and a series of investigative reports about the grand revamp of the capital.

A BIRN Serbia journalist scooped first prize for the best investigative journalism story in Serbia's print media. The award was given by the Independent Journalists Association of Serbia, NUNS, and the US Embassy in Belgrade.

The documentary film 'The Unidentified' - produced as part of BIRN's Balkan Transitional

Justice programme - won the best short documentary award at the South East European Film Festival in Los Angeles. The film investigated the Serbian commanders responsible for brutal attacks during the Kosovo war.

An investigation into judges' assets by BIRN Albania won first prize in the EU Investigative Journalism Award 2015 for Albania.

A BIRN Serbia journalist won first prize in the EU awards for investigative journalism in Serbia for a report on a controversial government tender to drain a flood-hit mine, while third prize went to a joint BIRN Hub and BIRN Kosovo story revealing how a multi-million-dollar road construction contract was quietly handed to a consortium with little highway-building experience linked to a controversial Serbian businessman.

BIRN Macedonia won the first and second prizes in the EU awards for investigative journalism for Macedonia for a series of articles related to the Telecom dossier and for Skopje 2014 Uncovered respectively.

The second prize in the EU awards for investigative journalism for Kosovo was awarded for the story published in BIRN Kosovo's Gazeta Jeta ne Kosove.

BIRN Serbia's documentary 'Flatland without Birds?', about illegal hunting in Serbia, was named the best Serbian film at the Belgrade International Green Culture Festival, Green Fest, in November.

BIRN Albania journalist Lindita Cela won a prestigious prize for hard-hitting investigations into organised crime and corruption in Albania. The Central European Initiative and the South East Europe Media Organisation, in special partnership with the Media Program South East Europe of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung awarded the prize.

BIRN Kosovo won an award for the Best Television Story on Transparency and Anti-Corruption at the Anti-Corruption Journalism Awards, chosen by the Association of Journalists in Kosovo in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme and the Kosovo Anti-Corruption Agency.

Internal Network Capacities Improved

During 2016, efforts were invested in institutionalising the Network's wide range of know-how and further improving monitoring and evaluation processes.

BIRN collected, systematised, standardised and made available to all Network members a significant portion of our accumulated experience and knowledge. In addition, the Network supported members in building their capacities and management skills in different fields in order to provide for long-term sustainability.

For the second year in a row, all BIRN Network members have received support from BIRN Hub in order to increase their financial management and

organizational/administrative management capacities through **the internal audits** conducted during spring. The internal audits were carried out to both identify shortcomings and advantages of the system in place and to share the experiences between people from different offices. The International Standards of Auditing were used as guidance for the best documentation, volume and methods to use. It was concluded that all the organisations are very well managed and no breaches of professional and ethical codes were found in any of them. On the contrary, it was noticeable that all Network members had improved their operations when it comes to financial and organisational/administrative management in comparison with previous years.

In March 2016, communication officers from all Network members participated in a two-day training programme organised by BIRN Hub as part of its focus on **staff capacity-building**, as well as improving the overall output of BIRN's publications for its international audiences.

A regional training session was held to boost the skills and knowledge needed to optimise the social media presence of the network's members and of the network itself. It was aimed at increasing the capacities for managing social media platforms and sharing information and experience between communication officers from the network. The lessons learned from the session resulted in the realisation of several successful social media campaigns, mapping the key problems and challenges of local organisations in terms of digital presence, initiating the redesign of the social media channels and brainstorming for future social media plans including creating a Network Social Media Strategy, which will result in better positioning for Network members on social networks, the internet in general and among its audience and followers.

As a part of its focus on staff capacity-building, BIRN Hub organised a two-day regional training session in October 2016 on 'Reporting on Impact'. The training provided a comprehensive overview and assessment of the approaches being employed in the field of assessing media impact, with a focus on social value perspective – in other words, analytical approaches that extend beyond financial measures of success to take into account criteria such as improving the well-being of individuals and communities across a wide range of dimensions that are central goals of the BIRN Network. The training sought to identify relevant analytical approaches, methodologies and metrics for assessing media impact in an effort to develop a baseline inventory of analytical tools, methods and metrics that can inform further work in this area, and to identify approaches that appear particularly promising.

It appears obvious that opportunities to better understand and demonstrate media impact are clearly expanding dramatically. The suggestions put forth at the training helped Network members to maximise these opportunities and thereby become more effective in achieving their goals and demonstrating their success.

BIRN's Kosovo country director Jeta Xharra was lead trainer at a workshop for Albanian-

language journalists from Macedonia, held in June 2016. The training session was attended by dozen journalist from Albanian language media from across the country. BIRN Kosovo's involvement in this course helped BIRN Macedonia to initiate a creation of a network of Albanian-language correspondents that will in future work with the local office and produce investigations in the framework of BIRN's standards for reporting. Apart from working on capacity building for the Albanian-language journalists in general, by sharing in-house expertise, knowledge and experience, the time spent with the journalists during the course and the interest that they demonstrated towards BIRN Macedonia resulted in increasing the capacities and the network of associates of BIRN Macedonia and expanding the team of correspondents.

All Network members have been actively involved in giving feedback on updating Administrative Procedure, Financial Procedure, Cooperation Agreement, Anticorruption Policy and the Editorial Policy draft outline, thus contributing towards the **development of comprehensive internal and external procedures** that will strengthen the network's capacities. In the second half of 2016, the updated procedures and policies were adopted by all Network members, which will result in better financial and administrative performance by the organisations and their staff.

As of December 2016, **intranet infrastructure** was set up across the entire Network. The intranet enables the offices to a joint storage and standardised the use of IT equipment. At later stages, this should result in better connections between offices and easier sharing of content and collaborative work.