



2017 BIRN Network Annual Report

Between Pressures and Praises

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

Through high-quality reporting and 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 of and holds accountable public institutions, which further enables civil society organisations, CSOs, and citizens to influence socio-political higher up.

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Social and Political Context; Media Freedom in the Region

Among the number of challenges the region of the Western Balkans faced in 2017, **deteriorating media freedom** and the unfavourable position of journalists with institutions are among the most often faced. Media freedom—a core EU value and a cornerstone of democracy—although a priority reform area in the Western Balkans' EU accession agenda, has many limitations in the region. Despite a certain level of preparedness and a broadly developed legal framework, aspirant countries keep facing systemic shortcomings, which require long-term sustained efforts. These attempts have stalled in recent years, resulting in a 'no progress' situation—one marked by similar trends and challenges across the region ([European Parliament, 2017](#)). This year saw an increase in the number of threats made to media workers in Serbia via the internet and social networks, but also in cases of surveillance.

An [upcoming report](#) for 2018 from the US rights watchdog Freedom House says **lack of media freedom, corruption, and weak institutions** remain pertinent issues throughout the Balkans – but singles out Serbia's growing authoritarianism as a matter of concern. Independent journalists and NGO workers in the Balkans have done indispensable work exposing crime, corruption, and right abuses.

Organised crime and corruption are among the key challenges the societies of the Western Balkans face, in particular corruption, which is a key grievance for ordinary citizens and voters. Limited professional and technical capacities, along with security concerns, were a common constraint on media reporting on organised crime and corruption identified across Bosnia, Kosovo and Serbia, a [BIRN regional study](#) on reporting about these issues in the respective countries concludes.

At the beginning of 2018, a [report](#) from the British House of Lords highlighted concerns that countries in the Western Balkans are **turning to authoritarian leaderships and nationalistic politics**. The report stresses that “gains made towards

good governance and the rule of law are in danger of being lost as countries in the region turn to authoritarian leadership, nationalistic politics and state capture”.

There were some positive developments as well; after years of democratic decline in the Western Balkans, the new Macedonian government that took office in May 2017 constituted democratic transfer of power and made a clear break from the previous government and its autocratic rule.

In 2017, BIRN Network operated in an environment of declining media freedoms and unregulated media markets, where the authorities and pro-governmental media outlets pressured members of the Network and its journalists, all while BIRN received national and international prizes as well as different kinds of informal praise.

We will contextualise the achievements of BIRN Network in a region defined by an unfavourable media situation and lack of proper cooperation with institutions—sometimes even hostile attitude—which occasionally hinders the work of our organisation. On the other hand, we will underscore the best results of our work, including the praise we have received. The report will show what the organization did to offer high quality journalistic work and to provide citizens with reliable, timely and in-depth reporting as well as BIRN’s contribution to improve the media freedom and openness of public institutions. It will additionally highlight the instances in which BIRN’s work had a strong political and social impact, showing that—despite difficulties—professional journalistic reporting concludes in tangible results.

BIRN's work in a challenging media context and striving to improve media freedom

Weakening EU and US influences in the Balkans and the increase of Russian influence as well as growing political and economic pressures on journalists have created a harsher environment for Balkan-based media, heard a BIRN biennial meeting (held in July, mountain Kopaonik, Serbia).

Ana Petrusheva, director of **BIRN Macedonia**, said the situation facing the media in the Balkans “seems to be going from bad to worse”. In addition to the usual political and financial pressures, she explained, the region’s media is seeing new types of pressure—the labeling of reporters and media outlets as spies and foreign mercenaries and the opening of a large number of fake news websites. Petrusheva said the flood of ‘fake news’ was “creating media noise” in which it was becoming continuously difficult for the public to distinguish between real and fake information, resulting in a general decline in media confidence. “People are losing trust in the media, and start to see everything as propaganda and promotion,” Petrusheva said.

Due to the organisation’s hard-hitting investigative work, during 2017, **BIRN Albania** had continuously been attacked by tabloid media, which claimed that it was a part of Soros’s conspiracy group, or as an American or EU ‘protégé’. BIRN Albania decided not to respond to these sporadic attacks that were based on nationalistic or anti-Semitic ideology, which, in the end, did not seem to have any influence on the public’s or donors’ perception of BIRN’s credibility and independency.

In addition, due to a series of investigations on the unjustified wealth of judges in June 2017, BIRN Albania and two of its journalists faced a civil lawsuit. Appeal Court Judge and HCJ member Gjin Gjoni opened a defamation case against BIRN Albania and journalists Aleksandra Bogdani and Besar Likmeta Gjoni and is seeking 52,000 euros for damages to reputation in lawsuit that—in our opinion, the opinion of legal

consul and various international media organizations, among them the European Federation of Journalists—amounts to a malicious lawsuit with a goal to only restrict media coverage of corruption in the judiciary. This lawsuit comes at a time when Albania is due to kick-start a key reform of this institution, where the role of media is foreseen, as an actor would act as a transparent, trustful and integral part of the legal process. Many international organizations reacted to this case considering it is a major threat to media freedom in Albania. During the period of July–December 2017, BIRN Albania attended five court sessions, most of which have been postponed by the plaintiff's lawyer due to personal engagements. Representatives of US Embassy, OSCE, EURALIUS, Council of Europe and Civil Rights Defenders have been closely following every court session. In the process, the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom has financially support BIRN by covering the legal costs.

In March 2017, supporters of the rightist VMRO DPMNE party (former ruling party) subjected **BIRN journalists in Macedonia** to an incendiary campaign on social networks. BIRN journalists have been targeted on social networks in Macedonia in connection to attacks on journalist and cameraman in Skopje, who were beaten up while covering a pro-VMRO DPMNE rally. After BIRN Macedonia's journalists published the news and tweeted about the attack, some Twitter users with generic nicknames accused BIRN journalists of being traitors and mercenaries. One user without a name went further, however, and—in what looked like an incitement to violence—published the home address of one of the BIRN journalists with a map. The case had been reported to Twitter and to the country's Helsinki Committee for Human Rights who filed a report with the Ministry of Interior's department for computer crimes. The Association of Macedonian Journalists, ZNM, had also been notified.

In Kosovo, due to political pressure, the dependency on advertising, the lack of professionalism, and the lack of proper institutional support for media education, a significant part of journalism remains “protocol journalism,” in which press conferences and press releases receive the most coverage.^[1] On most TV, radio and

^[1]<http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/WO1204/S00513/seemo-releases-report-on-media-situation-in-kosovo.htm>

print/online media, investigative reporting is close to non-existent, and the most content is published without prior fact checking—**BIRN Kosovo** is one of the rare exceptions.

Kosovo amended the Law on Copyright and Related Rights in 2016. This law stipulates that news must be protected for 12 hours, while no one can republish news or material without prior permission. However, the law is not respected and different media outlets copy each other without any criteria.[2] BIRN Kosovo, through its representatives in the Press Council of Kosovo (PCK), is pushing to enforce the implementation of legislation and codes of ethics; however, online portals with suspicious owners are making it increasingly difficult for independent outlets to require fact checking, and fight libel and defamation within the PCK itself. Additionally, according to a BIRN Kosovo report on media reporting on corruption and organised crime, access to information is one of the most problematic issues, which creates obstacles for media outlets seeking to do quality work. State institutions do not comply with the Law on Classification of Documents, thus creating confusion as to which documents the public can access (the Law on Classification of Documents categorizes public documents into those that are confidential and those which can be seen by the public). However, the main reason why access to information remains problematic stems from the fact that the Law on Access to Public Documents is not implemented in a uniform way throughout Kosovo's institutions as well as a mutual mistrust between the judiciary and the media.

In Kosovo, there is limited cooperation between the prosecution and police on one the side and journalists and media outlets on the other, and access to both formal and informal information is determined by several factors, including the professionalism of journalists, personal understanding of the principles of freedom of information by judicial officials and institutional culture.

[2] KALLXO.com. Conference to address the online media jungle. July 14, 2016.
<http://kallxo.com/konference-per-adresimin-e-xhungles-online-ne-kosove/>

Journalists mostly rely on information leaked by individuals within the judiciary and police—the police being the primary source of informal information. Most media outlets are not inclined to investigate and produce serious reports on cases of corruption and organised crime.

One important obstacle is the lack of resources to dedicate sufficient staff and time to reporting on such cases. Since BIRN Kosovo has delivered various editorial and legal on-the-job trainings to its journalists, the organisation gets better access to public documents in various Kosovo's public institutions.

In November 2017, Taulant Osmani, a BIRN Kosovo Journalist, was verbally abused and threatened with physical attacks during a protest against the relocation of a monument dedicated to the fallen of the 1941-1945 Anti-Fascist War in Gjilan. Osmani was covering the protest, following his earlier reporting on the tense debate between Gjilan's residents, the government, and civil society regarding the monument's relocation. Now, a statue of the early-twentieth-century Albanian military leader Idriz Seferi is being erected in its place.

Problems were recorded in Croatia as well. In December 2017, **Balkan Insight Croatia's correspondent** had been [labeled as an 'enemy'](#) journalist on the TV show '*Bujica*', which broadcasts on local TV channels in Croatia. Following the commemoration of Slobodan Praljak, the Bosnian Croat general who committed suicide in court after his war crimes sentence was upheld in The Hague, the Croatian TV show *Bujica* published a report on December 11 showing Sven Milekic, Croatia's correspondent for BIRN's flagship website, describing him as an 'enemy' and a 'anti-state' journalist.

Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic (now Serbian president) once again said that **BIRN Serbia** was lying about *Tamnava* (BIRN's award-winning investigative story from 2015) in March 2017. "We have had cases like BIRN who unambiguously lied over the Western *Tamnava*, and exactly for that text they won EU award," Vucic said on talk show on Pink TV.

In September 2017 the media network *Antidot* published a story entitled "United in Disinformation of the Public", which states: "The Antidote file contains precise analysis of content as well as the way of fabricating and placing some well-known affairs by self-styled investigation media such as BIRN, CINS and KRIK." *Antidot* says that BIRN, CINS and KRIK received journalistic awards and extensive financial funds from abroad, with the help of related journalistic associations and NGOs, without any criterion. The Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (IJAS) and the Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina (IJAV) issued this statement: "[A new impact of power, parastatal structures and regime media on independent media](#)". The page "BIRN under Fire" that is dedicated to attacks on BIRN can be found here:

<http://birn.eu.com/birn-under-fire>.

BIRN has also worked, in cooperation with other media outlets and organisations, on improving media situation in the countries where it operates.

In **Serbia**, one of the most important issues to the Network is related to drafting a new media strategy, which should trace the development of the media sector in the following years. BIRN submitted its proposals to the Ministry of Culture and Information through a representative participating in a working group, who additionally partook in a bilateral meeting in Ministry. BIRN's proposals were mostly related to increasing transparency and improving procedures in allocation of public funds in media sector as well as posing suggestions related to online media. The Ministry still has yet to submit the draft proposal of the strategy to public debate, so whether some of BIRN proposals were accepted has not come into fruition. In 2018, BIRN will actively participate in public debates related to this strategic document. Drafting a media strategy has turned out to be yet another disagreed upon issue between the government and media organisations regarding its conflicts. Namely, a one-year delay in drafting and implementation of strategy Ministry of Culture, by assembling working groups, has initiated work on the creation of this strategic document. Yet, the performance of the working group is, from the start, hampered by various controversies, culminating with four members of it terminating its engagement. Former members of the working group claimed that methodology of the

effort, set up by Ministry, is inefficient and would not result in a strategic document that could be supported by professional community.

BIRN Serbia, within the larger consortium of media organisations, began working on alternative strategic proposals, which highlighted the most important principles that a new document would need to encompass in order to be effective. Also, in Serbia's advocacy actions aimed at developing the media sector in the country in order to further the EU integration agenda and combat issues of deteriorating media freedoms and regression, BIRN submitted an Alternative Report on the fulfilment of obligations stipulated in Action Plan for Negotiating Chapter 23 (freedom of expression and media pluralism) to European Commission, as contribution to next EC Progress Report (expected to be released in April 2018).

BIRN Serbia, as a part of Association of Online Media (AOM), is active in an inter-sectorial group devoted to the protection of journalists against threats and pressures, and it is comprised of the media associations Ministry of Interior and Public Prosecution Office.

Media Ownership Monitor (MOM), specialising in portals and databases, and which BIRN Serbia created in cooperation with Reporters without Borders, is a part of a global project looking into the ties of media ownership and its influence on media pluralism. BIRN Serbia's research looked into ownership structures (companies and individual owners) of 48 leading TV, radio, print and online media outlets that have the most influence on the public in Serbia. The [database and portal](#) revealed that deep-rooted political affiliations and client-based relations caused media outlets to be chronically dependent on allocations of budgetary money. The numerous documents, data and information gathered, enabled the calculation of Risk Indicators, which highlighted great risks for audience concentration, vertical and cross-media concentration as well as in state funding allocation. **BIRN Albania** is working on MOM in order for Albania to use the same methodology.

BIRN's regional survey "Exercising the Freedom of Expression and Openness of State Institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia", supported by the

German Federal Foreign Office Stability Pact fund, is a 10-month-long project aiming to contribute to professionalising media reporting on legal proceedings related to organized crime and corruption. The project is also intended to increase public awareness on the issues of access to the judicial system and assist in making institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia more transparent and responsive. The project resulted in three unique countrywide and one cross-regional analysis—the first of its kind that offers a regional perspective on this topic. In addition to looking at how the media reports on the topic, the study also sought to unpack why the media reports on organized crime and corruption in the ways that they do; specifically, the study sought to identify the challenges and constraints media organizations face across the region when it comes to reporting on organized crime and corruption.

BIRN Albania has continuously collaborated and promoted the work of different NGOs and grassroots organisations through articles with a special focus on human rights and media freedom. In order to promote the collaboration between journalists and activists as well as BIRN Albania's capacity to produce multimedia content, BIRN has engaged a specialised film crew to produce a short documentary on the fight of different environmental groups in Albania to protect three national parks from the construction of hydropower plants in April 2017.

During that same year, BIRN Albania has also produced 12 video-investigations, which aired on the daily news magazine of the VOA Albanian Service *Ditari* that is broadcasted by 41 TV stations in Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. The video-investigations produced emphasised many instances of misuse of power, corruption and illicit wealth among judges; links between judges and members of organized crime; and the lack of transparency of the judicial system, which limited media freedoms and the right to information.

BIRN Albania also published the country's first manual on Crime and Court Reporting for Albanian Journalists as a means of better understanding how to shape the needs and effective interventions to build journalists' capacity for reporting on courts and

judicial reform. During the spring of 2017, BIRN Albania has conducted a situational analysis on current crime and court reporting standards and needs in the country. The data collected through this evaluation was used by a group of experts to draft the outline of the manual in addition to the incorporation of necessary data and case studies from media coverage of crime or court cases in the country. This manual was successfully published in September 2017

In **Macedonia**, Resource Page was developed and published at the local BIRN publication, *Prizma*; it started with the idea that well informed journalists with access to data are better equipped to fight for media freedom. The resource page contains an overview and access to all databases and research published over the past four years; access to address book with more than 100 journalists and CSO's from Macedonia; access to mobile and internet applications developed in recent years (like the mobile application "Skopje 2014 Uncovered") and the web application "Public officials uncovered"; and links to the extensive media monitoring studies published in 2013 and 2017 along with interactive charts presentation of the comparative data.

Furthermore, in Macedonia, the monitoring of media reporting that aims to assess the quantity and quality of investigative and analytical reporting is implemented under the auspices of the "Investigative Reporting for Promotion of Reforms" project, and is financed by the European Union. The project, which was implemented in 2016 and will continue until 2019, aims to promote and stimulate the growth of investigative reporting with the purpose of contributing to better informing the public, and protection its interests. It should stimulate the editorial offices and newsrooms and their journalists to dedicate greater attention to in-depth, substantial analysis of problems and issues and to separate themselves—quality-wise—from the presentation of short, fast, superficial and sensationalist information offered to citizens, thus contextualising the subject and allowing readers better insight into the situation.

In **Kosovo**, the fact-checking website Krypometer has similar premise—that well-informed citizens and journalists can better defend their rights. The site was

launched as a response to the uncertainty, obscurity and lack of accountability for public statements, and is the first tool in Kosovo that will rate truthfulness—in essence, work as a fact checker. BIRN’s anti-corruption platform KALLXO.com and its TV programme “Life in Kosovo” are part of the International Fact-Checking Network, IFCN, by the Poynter Institute. In addition to being part of an international fact-checking community, BIRN also subscribes to the ethical principles that must be applied to validating facts. An impartial and transparent verification of truths can become a powerful instrument for proficient journalism, which was applied during the given reporting period, by continuously holding Kosovo’s public officials accountable for their public statements. Moreover, BIRN’s Krypometer was also awarded a verified badge from International Fact-Checkers Network on December 8, 2017, after passing an independent auditing process.

BIRN BiH is still the only media outlet in BiH writing about disciplinary measure procedures within judiciary institutions in the country. Those cases, which were unfamiliar to the public—due to the lack of statements or any other kind of information that could have been sent to the public by the judiciary. Reporting on cases, like ones against former Chief Prosecutor Goran Salihovic or Prosecutor Oleg Cavka, has enabled BIRN BiH to help the public receive information on disciplinary procedures, and other media outlets, which expressed their interest on the topics.

Between closed institutions and accountability initiatives

Many institutions, throughout the region, remain closed to media and to citizens by proxy. BIRN is systematically working toward public officials and institutions that are of service of the people accountable.

From the end of June until end of December 2017, most of Kosovo's public institutions were predominately focused on the parliamentary elections; however, **BIRN Kosovo** has not faced any major obstacles posed by public institutions. Nevertheless, there were usual delays in providing responses or access to public documents and information, or in completing public pledges made to Kosovo's citizens. The lack of a functional government and parliament has slowed the ability of working groups to create legislation changes, although some of them have come along quite far into the process. Now, much will depend on political willingness and MPs' individual causes that they are committed to, to push forward the parliamentary committees they head. BIRN and other civil society organisations have seen a drawback in the overall work done in these working groups.

BIRN Kosovo focused much of its energy on organising live debates each night of the electoral campaign; on covering it; on conducting analysis and investigations on campaign financing; on undertaking educational activities calling for people to vote and respect legal requirements; and on monitoring the day of the elections and subsequent legal complaints. While these activities have not hindered the implementation of foreseen projects and activities, or in reaching the set specific objectives and outcomes, they have required specific strategizing and targeting of a particular audience.

In BiH, after writing and publishing that the Minister of Communications and Transport Ismir Jusko, bought the most expensive car with designer's signature; he filed

lawsuits—four of them to be exact—against two editors and directors of the organization. **BIRN BiH** hired a lawyer, after, which Jusko and Fahrudin Radoncic, the leader of the Alliance for a Better Future of BiH party, called with proposal to sign mutual agreement—Jusko’s withdraws the lawsuits while BIRN BiH would not write on the topic, or him anymore. BIRN BiH refused this proposal, and took another legal step, filing a response to the lawsuit. After this failed attempt of political pressure, Jusko arbitrarily withdrew the lawsuits, without any further contact.

BIRN Hub’s award-winning investigative programme “**A Paper Trail to Better Governance**” continuously faces issues whenever journalists need to obtain information from any state body and/or officials. Most of the institutions remain closed and do not provide BIRN with answers to FOI requests. BIRN has sent over 150 FOI requests and for about one-fifth of them, journalist needed to send official complaint to FOI officer. Out of that number, at least one-third remained unanswered. The situation is similar, yet not the same in all countries.

BIRN Serbia has had similar experiences; according to its internal statistics, the percentage of responsiveness dropped by more than 10 percent; furthering the closing of public institutions will only set to diminish the transparency of media policies, especially distribution of public finances to the media. It will produce more fertile grounds for politicians and businesses to abuse the media and influence its content. In order to fight this occurrence, BIRN will strive to develop more actions, to tackle the accountability and transparency of public institutions, keeping this subject high on the public’s agenda. The organisation will also use all available data in support of relevant institutions, the first of which will be the Commissioner For Information Of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection.

Civil society groups in Macedonia have faced increasing pressure, from smear campaigns to raids by tax inspectors, ever since the ruling VMRO-DPMNE party in December 2016 vowed to ‘free’ Macedonia from the influence of NGOs linked to US donor George Soros, a process the party has called “De-Soros-isation”. **BIRN Macedonia** has been included in campaigns portraying all independent NGOs as traitors and mercenaries working for Western intelligence services to destroy the country. A group called “Stop Operation Soros”, in mid-February 2017, published a

report that claimed USAID money was funnelled into organisations affiliated to Soros's Open Society Foundations.

The report authored by three individuals, all VMRO-DPMNE supporters, named BIRN as "a Soros proxy" and gave inaccurate information about the funds BIRN Macedonia has received from USAID. It also claimed that BIRN's online publication *Prizma* was linked to Soros and the main opposition Social Democratic Union, SDSM. On February 12, 2017, TV show host Vasko Eftov, on air, claimed that BIRN and Balkan Insight belonged to a media network run by the British intelligence service MI6 in the Balkans, and named BIRN's investigative editor, Lawrence Marzouk. The report has been picked up and republished by other pro-government websites in both the Macedonian and English language. Macedonia holds the worst rank in the Balkans when it comes to press freedom and has a history of attacks and death threats directed towards journalists.

Closed institutions (i.e. ministries and agencies) have partially influenced the dynamics of data gathering, making this process lengthier for BIRN Macedonia. Central registry and other similar institutions, in most cases, are holders of large institutional datasets, and are still charging fees for their services that mostly are used to obtain data. With a portion of the data that BIRN has gathered during the past year, this influences the organisational budget.

BIRN BiH faced obstacles while researching for the final analysis on the implementation of the State Reform Strategy; the new President of the State Court refused to give the organisation a statement, and only sent a brief, written note. Although several requests have been sent, there was no response from the Ministry of Justice in Republika Srpska. These two examples are also indicators of the lack of transparency within judiciary institutions, highlighting that the stated goals from the Reform Strategies have yet to be met.

Azra Miletic, judge of the State Court, who was sentenced to two years in jail for corruption in August 2017, called the journalists following her case, complaining about reporting from the courtroom, increased pressure on editorial policy and BIRN BiH's internal rules on court reporting.

After writing about new a furniture purchase for Cantonal Minister in Tuzla, the Office of the Cantonal Minister sent a public reaction to the article, saying that it presents an “attack of political opposition on the work of the Prime minister of the Canton”. In 2017, in addition to the yearlong problem receiving relevant video material from the courtrooms, hindrances were also evident within some other institutions, which were unwilling to provide BIRN BiH with answers related to the requested information.

BIRN BiH continues to implement its 4-year-strategy document: dealing with the past with a focus on war crime trials will stay on top of the organisation’s work, accompanied by organized crime, corruption and terrorism cases. BIRN BiH is paying more attention to the works of the judiciary, positioning itself as a respectful watchdog on the work of judicial institutions in the country. Furthermore, BIRN BiH started following public tenders, as many irregularities can be found in its documentation, and such misdeeds lack have yet to be reported. In 2018, BIRN BiH will have its first database on public procurement procedures focusing on the purchasing of new cars.

In Albania, in order to influence the work of public institutions, **BIRN Albania** has worked in three main directions: increasing transparency on local government; developing a monitoring methodology on the transparency of courts; and observing the implementation of freedom of information laws in different institutions and the enrichment of its online databases. In order to increase the transparency of local institutions, as exemplified in June 2016, BIRN Albania undertook the first national monitor on the level of transparency throughout all 61 municipalities of the country—the findings of which were published in the report “Local Government Under the Lens of Freedom of Information”. In order to measure the possible impact of the first report, the monitoring study was repeated once again in March of 2017. The report contains the results on the transparency of the 61 local government units in Albania, based on 50 indicators, tracing the progress made by local municipalities in implementing the freedom of information and public consultation laws. This was the

first nation-wide monitoring study that focused on the local government that Albania undertook; its methodology was considered valuable and was recognised as a tool for local institutions to assess their work by the Freedom of Information (FoI) Commissioner – the public institution responsible for the implementation of FoI and Public Consultation Laws.

BIRN Hub's Balkan Transitional Justice programme (BTJ) regularly reports on vulnerable and marginalised groups, focusing on victims of war crimes and wartime rape. The programme's goal is to foster a sense of accountability in institutions in charge of prosecuting war crimes. Extensive coverage was focused on relevant events concentrating on war victims: the anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide, the Croatian military operation 'Storm', the fall of the defence of the Croatian town of Vukovar (along with problems of non-prosecuted war crimes and the problem of the missing persons), as well as victims' perspective after ICTY's verdicts in Ratko Mladic and Prlic et al. cases. BTJ has special sub-pages on its website dedicated to gender justice, missing persons, returnees and IDPs and victims' rights. Documentary films also tell the stories of victims/witnesses of conflict in Kosovo and victims of human reallocation, which occurred between Croatia and Serbia during the 1990s. In October 2017, the BTJ team made a request to the higher prosecution to make public the indictment against those who helped Ratko Mladic, Bosnian Serb general sentenced for genocide, hide in Serbia while he was wanted by the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia. Although the indictment was initially a secret, following BIRN's reports and pressure from the public, the indictment was sent to BIRN after a month of campaigning. Key findings from the indictment were later published on the BTJ website.

Prizes and Praises

BIRN Network's members took home 11 awards in 2017 for reporting within their respective countries as well as for their regional and international investigations.

A multi-country series of investigations about weapons exports into the Middle East, which were produced by **BIRN Hub** and **BIRN Kosovo**, won three awards in 2017.

Judges awarded both BIRN Hub and Kosovo with the prestigious Global Shining Light Award, honouring the investigation in November—citing its excellence.

“Making a Killing” also received special recognition at the Global Investigative Journalism Conference 2017 in Johannesburg and received a certificate of excellence. The report was a joint-production where we worked alongside the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). The story deals with the Pentagon funneling \$2.2 billion worth of Soviet-made arms into Syria.

The report is part of a wider research project by BIRN and the OCCRP on the illegal international arms trade. In July 2017, it was shortlisted for the Global Shining Light Award sponsored by the Global Investigative Journalism Network, an association of 155 non-profit organisations in 68 countries. “Making a Killing” also won an award for online media in an investigative journalism competition organised by the Independent Journalistic Association of Serbia and was additionally recognised as an exemplary reporting in an online poll by voters in October.

The Kosovo Journalist Association and German Corporation November for International Cooperation awarded **BIRN Kosovo's** journalist Doruntia Baliu with the “Best Story on Education” prize. The award was given to Baliu for her investigation into a grade falsification scandal in the municipality of Drenas in Kosovo.

Pristina-based journalist Serbeze Haxhiaj was also honoured in October for her story ‘The Enduring Agony of Wartime Rape in Kosovo’, published on **BIRN's flagship website Balkan Insight**. The story explores how women who have been raped and

tortured during the Kosovo War are not applying for reparation schemes due to the stigma of rape that is still prevalent in Kosovar society nearly 20 years after the war ended.

BIRN Kosovo's television programme "*Jeta ne Kosove*" (Life in Kosovo) and the anti-corruption platform KALLXO.com accepted the second prize for investigative journalism by the European Union Office in Kosovo in May. The investigation that caught the five-jury members' eyes was "Organized Tax Fraud," which revealed that over 300 of Kosovo's businesses were involved in a tax evasion scheme through the use of shell companies.

Aleksandar Dimitrievski, author of a BIRN story about a database for agricultural subsidies (**BIRN Macedonia**), won first prize for investigative journalism for 2016, and received the award at a ceremony in Skopje, Macedonia in May 2017. Dimitrievski's story documents the amount of agricultural subsidies granted to individuals and companies over four years, from 2010-2014, that are worth about 450 million euros.

The Association of Journalists of Macedonia gave its annual investigative reporting award for 2016 to BIRN journalist Vlado Apostolov in February for his series of articles on properties connected to a Macedonian official, Vladimir Zdravev. Apostolov received the "Yasar Erebara" award for three of these investigative articles on properties linked to the former chairman of the Council in the Skopje Municipality, which were published on **BIRN Macedonia's** website *Prizma*.

Dragan Gmizic's "Flatland Without Birds?", a documentary (**BIRN Serbia**) about illegal bird hunting in Serbia, won the second prize in the EU Investigative Journalism Awards for 2016. The film, co-produced by BIRN Serbia and Greenfield Productions, examines how the hunting of rare turtledoves and quails in Serbia is organised and questions whether it can be controlled. The documentary was aired on TV N1, TV CG, and Al Jazeera Balkans.

First prize went to Maja Zivanovic for her series of stories for VOICE, the Investigative and Analytic Centre of Vojvodina. Maja is currently working for BIRN's regional publication Balkan Insight.

BIRN Serbia journalist Jelena Veljkovic's story "The Secret of Vucic's Tavern" won an award in the print media category at the annual competition for investigative journalism, which is organised by the Independent Journalistic Association of Serbia. Her story investigated claims that Serbia's Property Directorate was unaware that an exclusive restaurant had opened in a part of the Belgrade Cooperative building, which the directorate had leased to the "Belgrade Waterfront" company. The directorate refused to answer whether it believed the use of public property by a private company was in accordance with the law.

Elvis Nabolli, a 2016 fellow in the **BIRN Hub's Balkan Fellowship for Journalistic Excellence**, won the award for best article by a young investigative journalist, as part of the part of the EU Investigative Awards in Albania in June 2017. Nabolli won for his article, "An Albanian War on Drugs", which was produced as part of the fellowship and was published by Balkan Insight.

Informal praise: Balkan Insight reviews on Facebook

Social networks, notably the most popular one in the region—Facebook—are important both for promotion of BIRN's work and for receiving feedback from our professional and general audience following our work. While criticism, even hate speech, on Facebook often happens in regards to politics or nationalism, positive reviews highlight the importance of BIRN's social and political reporting on regional level.

The case of BIRN's regional publication Balkan Insight underscores what our regional and international readers value most about the organisation's work.

March 7

The best and most objective English language news site on the Balkans.

That's why regionalists and nationalists of all Balkan tribes don't like it, since everyone's nationalism is critically observed.

June 11

In my opinion, BIRN is a reliable and objective network. I follow about three pages of BIRN in Facebook, and I always refer to it for the most neutral angle in events around Balkans. I especially appreciate international networks which cover Balkans, and I would rank BIRN high up in the list. It is understandable how many people don't like it - some of its articles are "too true" to be read in our countries.

June 28

Probably the best news website in the Balkans.

September 29

Wonderful website that I follow every day and I share news from it... Well done friends... You show us issues that we might face in the future in Cyprus when there is reunification... I read with awe what you have been writing... very good quality investigative journalism... an eye opener about the Balkans since the "news" floating around us keeps all what you write "hidden" and we learn in depth from you... thanks so much for this...

Impact of BIRN reporting

BIRN's journalistic work produced some very tangible social and political changes, both within the region and internationally, showing that non-profit media can influence the work of public institutions and authorities when applying high professional standard to their work.

Belgrade – Serbia

After BIRN published a story, which proved that the public enterprise *Beogradska tvrđava* (Belgrade Fortress) had not worked on reconstructing a building in a protected and declared cultural heritage site but instead was building a new one, which, in the future, should serve as a bar, the Ministry of constructions issued a document prohibiting this kind of works. The development of the bar in the park has been stopped and now the investor has demolished the building and restored the site to its original state.

Tirana – Albania

For the election that was held in April 2017, BIRN staff produced news, analysis and investigations on electoral crime. The coverage spanned from incidents of office and vote buying abuses that authorities uncovered, or last-minute changes introduced by political parties to the criminal code following a pre-electoral agreement between Prime Minister Edi Rama and opposition leader Lulzim Basha that BIRN analysed. The investigation, which was found to have a tangible effect on institutions was produced by the reporter Elvis Nabolli from Shkodra, who documented how various officials of the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI) were offering local residences jobs in a prison facility—funded by the EU and that was still under renovation at the time—in exchange for their votes. Following the publication of the investigation, the Ministry of Justice launched an administrative inquiry that confirmed BIRN's findings and filed

charges against several LSI officials, including two MP candidates in the region of Shkodra.

Mountain Kopaonik – Serbia

BIRN's investigative story about illegal construction at the National Park of Kopaonik has shown that the building under construction did not fall in line with the directions of the Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia. BIRN's text initiated a quick response inspection unit of the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure of Serbia, which ordered the investor to destroy the building and clean up the area on the highest point of Kopaonik mountain. (The restaurant was built despite the order, but the case is still developing).

Athens – Greece

BIRN discovered that government of Serbia did not fulfill its obligations towards Mytilineos—a Greek investor—after the arbitration court from Switzerland issued a warning in October 2017, that Serbia has to pay more than 200 thousand dollars in interest. A day after the story had been published, the government of Serbia initiated meeting with Mytilineos representatives and agreed upon the parameters of paying the debt to this company.

Podgorica - Montenegro

A women's organisation in Montenegro began a campaign in November 2017 fighting against illegal prenatal gender tests and sex-selective abortions, after BIRN's investigation into the reasons behind the country's stark gender imbalance.

Following this investigation into the subject, Women's Right Center and NGOs in Montenegro, launched the first phase of a campaign highlighting the problem of gender-selective abortion and urged authorities to tackle the phenomenon.

#Nezeljena [#Unwanted] was launched at an event in Podgorica, and several other towns were flooded with pink obituaries with a female character drawn on them and a printed message. "Dear #Unwanted, your parents wanted a boy and that's why you didn't get a chance to be born. Forgive them. Your grieving Montenegro," the obituary reads.

In the beginning of 2018, at the Montenegrin Eurovision song contest, one of the songs were inspired by this campaign.

Kiev-Ukraine

After BIRN interviewed the Ukrainian ambassador to Serbia, tensions between Kiev and Belgrade rose. Ukraine's Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin called on Serbia to respect his country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. After summoning the ambassador to Serbia back to Kiev for consultations on November 3rd, Ukraine's government had urged Serbia to show respect for its sovereignty and integrity, and to deal with the issue of Serbs fighting for pro-Russian forces in the Donbas area of Eastern Ukraine.

In an interview with BIRN on November 1, Ukraine's ambassador to Belgrade Oleksandr Aleksandrovych explained that Serbia was not doing nearly enough to stop its citizens from travelling to Ukraine to fight for pro-Russian forces in the east. The ambassador said that Russian propaganda and its secret services had played a huge role in attracting Serbian and other foreign mercenaries to Ukraine. He also accused Russia of playing a terribly damaging role in the Balkans in general.

Pristina - Kosovo

In March, the "Life in Kosovo" team initiated an investigation after receiving a report about a patient who was left paralysed after being inadequately treated by public and private hospitals in Kosovo. Afterwards, judicial institutions immediately addressed

the case, and the Health Inspectorate suspended the license of the private hospital that provided citizens with their services.

Kacanik-Kosovo

Florim Neziraj, the head of the Islamic Union of Kosovo (BIK) in Kacanik announced the death of Kosovo's ISIS leader, Lavdrim Muhaxheri, from the city's mosque—a task that he usually does for every death in town. Given that Muhaxheri was an extremist, and BIK announced his death without the approval of Central Kosovo's BIK, this pronouncement could have been seen as unethical. KALLXO.com reported on the case, and after its publication, Neziraj was dismissed from his duty as head of BIK Kacanik.

Rugova-Kosovo

Two weeks after BIRN published an article underscoring that the citizens were unsatisfied with the conditions of a road that links them to Rugova—and as a result of BIRN's actions—the road was fixed.

Istog - Kosovo

BIRN Kosovo reported on the Mayor of the Municipality of Istog, Haki Rugova, who was also a stakeholder in a construction company named Macon—where, despite being a municipal property, tenders were given to it. After publishing BIRN's investigation, Rugova changed his declaration of wealth and is no longer a stakeholder in the company.

Pristina - Kosovo

Based on the research conducted by investigators and legal team of BIRN Kosovo, several violations were found during political activities that the mayoral candidates hosted in the midst of a local election campaign, which were held on October 22. In total, 111 complaints were sent to Election Complaint and Appeal Panel (ECAP), out of which 28 resulted in political entities being fined. The majority of them included cases where persons under the age of 18 were seen participating in political activities and gatherings. Pictures of such activities were found on social media, such as the Facebook pages of candidates.

Kaiserslautern - Germany

A BIRN investigation had sparked an official probe into whether the Pentagon broke the law by sending weapons to Syrian rebels through its German airbases. In September 2017, a public prosecutor in the German city of Kaiserslautern carried out a preliminary investigation into the findings of an investigation that **BIRN**, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and the Süddeutsche Zeitung published. Checks were used to show if the US military failed to properly declare the movement of weapons from Central and Eastern Europe through Ramstein, which is 20 kilometres from Kaiserslautern. The news came about after BIRN published fresh information linking Ramstein to the Pentagon's huge operation to buy up vast quantities of Soviet-style weapons in Central and Eastern Europe for Syrian rebels fighting Islamic State in Syria. The prosecution office in Kaiserslautern announced on February 7, 2018, that while it did not rule out that weapons bound for Syria had passed through the US airbase, there were "no indications of concrete arms transports" via Ramstein discovered that precluded the launch of a criminal investigation.

These stories were quoted in hundreds of texts around the world, in around forty different countries, most often in Germany, Russia and Russian international editions, United States, the countries of the Balkans.

Sarajevo - BiH

Five public institutions changed their tender documentation after BIRN BiH sent requests for information, after it detected malversations in these bodies' paperwork. BiH Presidency and the City of Prijedor published tenders for new cars: the Presidency only put exact specifications on one car that meets the market's standards, while the City of Prijedor offered to swap an old car for a new one—both procedures were illegal and non-transparent. In the first instance, documentation was changed, while the second one continued the bad practice of switching an old entity for a new one. Furthermore, after BIRN BiH requests for information, the public Water Supply and Sewerage agency and Faculty of Medicine in Sarajevo withdrew their tenders for purchasing new cars, while Parliament of BiH withdrew documentation for buying new car tires.

Srebrenica - BiH

Following a report in an episode of BIRN BiH TV Justice episode from November 2014, Prosecutor Office filed an indictment against Sasa Cvetkovic, whose trial at the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina began on July 11, 2017. In the November 2014 episode of 'TV Justice', the victim, who identified herself by the initials K.E., said she was taken from Srebrenica to Bratunac as a 15-year-old and was raped several times in abandoned houses. Her emotional testimony caused the prosecutor to seek her out and initiate an investigation.

Peja - Kosovo

An ad for BIRN Kosovo's "Justice in Kosovo" show resulted in the arrest of the son of a town judge who was caught on tape taking a bribe in Peja. The video footage that was obtained by Justice in Kosovo, shows Tolaj's son taking money and negotiating the transfer of ownership of a plot of land in exchange for resolving a court case in

favor of the Kelmendi family. The judge's son, Fisnik Tolaj, was in custody, while judge Safete Tolaj was suspended, and is still under house arrest. The case remains in the hands of the prosecution; one of our journalists has tried to contact the prosecutor of the case but they said they were not willing to comment.

Sarajevo - BiH

BIRN BiH published a story about malversation of public tenders in the BiH Presidency in April. During the researching phase, BIRN BiH sent a FOI request into who was buying a car with baby equipment, who would use it and why did they have exact specification for one car model, which is against law. BIRN never received an answer, but the tender documentation was changed right after the FOI was sent in.

Tirana – Albania

On November 22nd, BIRN Albania published an investigation, which shed light on how Albania's Democratic Party used a shell offshore company in order to make secret payments to a US Lobbyist. The Democratic Party failed to report to Albania's Electoral Commission, CEC, on the payments of more than half-a-million dollars, which was made out to a US lobbyist in Washington D.C—where one of the transfers was paid. Based on this investigation, BIRN Albania published two follow-up stories on 25th and 30th of November. The first story, reported on the official declarations of the head of Democratic Party, who in contrast to the previous declarations to BIRN, admitted to paying the US Lobbyist. The second story directly impacted the Party; the prosecutor's office announced an official criminal investigation into the Democratic Party for falsification and false declaration of assets related to the sum of 675,000 USD paid to lobbying companies in US, which were left out of the financial report delivered to the CEC. Generally, BIRN reporting on political finances during 2017 had high political impact and were widely discussed among politicians and the media.

Internal Network Capacities Improved; Strengthening the Network

In 2017, BIRN has taken further steps to strengthen its Network and capacities: organising internal and external capacity building trainings, drafting and adopting procedures are just a few examples.

In July, BIRN organised its **second biennial network meeting** at the mountain of Kopaonik in Serbia. The event was attended by over a hundred of the staff from the six countries where BIRN has organisations, along with correspondents and editors from other countries, members of the Board, and representatives of donor organisations. The meeting also presented itself as the occasion to plan and give out BIRN's activities and achievements. Debates on media and political organisation were also held as well as a range of working meetings and games that boosted the team-building spirit. A page dedicated to this event and additional reports, photo gallery, video and power point presentations, and materials from the meeting held in 2015 is on BIRN's institutional web site: <http://birn.eu.com/network-meeting-2017>.

In December, Balkan Insight held a four-day **digital media training** course for its reporters and editors across the region, focusing on writing for the web and shooting video stories on mobile phones. Around 30 BIRN reporters and editors participated in the intensive, practical training course in Belgrade.

In October, BIRN Hub representatives discussed media development and **capacity development** opportunities and partnerships with journalists, media organisations, donors and international organisations in Chisinau, **Moldova**, which resulted in a project focused on strengthening media capacities in this country.

In October, a regional meeting was held in Belgrade with the team that carries out the regular **monitoring of BIRN presence in media** and its publications. People from Albania, Kosovo, BiH and Serbia attended the meeting, discussing the issues highlighted during the previous two years—and a plan was agreed upon for the next two weeks, adopting new and improved methodology.

In the period of 30/11 – 2/12, BIRN held **training** for its partner organisation CIN in **Montenegro**, which worked on strengthening internal and operational capacities. This is a part of BIRN's strategy to share its know-how within the Network and partner organisations.

In February, twenty BIRN Programme and Project Managers were trained to build their capacities in the field of **project cycle management**. The College of Europe from Bruges designed and implemented this training programme and participants from Romania, Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia took part.

Based on the proposed (2015) and adopted (2016) filing structure, BIRN Hub's operational personnel have developed an entire structure, which was tested through actual re-coding and filing of documents into the new structure. During this testing process, several changes and modifications were applied to the structure and the final applied structure was presented to the administrative/operational staff of the network members in December. BIRN Hub is now developing a manual and an access list that will be distributed to all BIRN Hub staff and Network members by the end of March. The implementation of archiving on the intranet is foreseen to take place in full by the end of the current year.

BIRN staff took part in nine trainings organised by ERSTE NGO Academy in Vienna and around the region, and many other trainings and seminars related to media, transitional justice and strengthening non-profit sector, to name a few.

Annex:

Trainings for journalists and NGO activists organised by BIRN Network members

Sharing knowledge and know-how is an essential part of BIRN's work. This practice continued in 2017.

Albania

In order to increase the capacities of local journalists in investigative and specialised reporting, during 2017, BIRN Albania has provided on-the-job training and mentoring for 24 local journalists who were awarded with reporting grants to assist them in covering corruption and impunity in the field of local government, financial institutions, asset declarations of judges, political party finances, judiciary, environmental hotspots and consumers' rights. The journalists have been selected after an application procedure, which included open calls for each of the fields and were evaluated by an independent jury. The journalists have received continuous mentoring from BIRN Albania's local and international editors for a period of 1-4 months each, as well as nonstop on-the-job training in respect to journalistic standards, interviewing techniques with human sources and following the paper and electronic trail of documents and databases.

Also during 2017, 17 journalists from different regions of Albania worked as reporters and editors for local news media outlets and have received continuous on-the-job training and mentoring as well as financial support to cover the costs of following important issues to local communities, with a special focus on local government, civil society actors, elections and crime/court reporting.

Twenty local journalists have received two-days training on political party financing.

Twenty local journalists have received three-day training on crime and court reporting.

Ten local journalists have received three-day follow-up training on advanced techniques on court and crime reporting as well the use of multimedia tools.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

BIRN BiH helped its partner think-tank Analitika to organise a workshop called "Monitoring trials in the context of corruption cases: the key elements, approach and

criteria” for 12 journalists. In addition, BIRN’s staff participated in organising workshops on Online Communication and Counter- Messaging, by BIRN and CIJA.

Three trainings "Let's hear women" were organised for women representing the NGO sector in Sarajevo, Mostar and Tuzla. Held by the Voice of America team, BIRN BiH organised training for its and BIRN Serbia journalists, along with colleagues from seven Bosnian newsrooms and students of journalism, training in mobile video production.

Kosovo

BIRN organised an on-the-job training covering the basics of writing news; a training on the effective use of social media in investigative journalism; two trainings on election monitoring with one of the trainings taking place prior to the parliamentary elections, and the other prior to the municipal elections. Moreover, during this reporting period, BIRN organized an on-the-job training for monitoring cases related to gender-based violence and the relevant court proceedings.

In addition, the BIRN team shared its knowledge on legal expertise in investigative journalism, on how to request access to public documents, on techniques of journalistic writing, on relevant social media tips, on regulations related to live broadcasting of court proceedings, including the rules and regulations related to the participation of wide public within court sessions.

BIRN also held on-the-job trainings to enhance the capacities of monitors to identify specific issues related to the delivery of public services and court monitoring. This training was also provided to the new monitors who joined BIRN throughout this reporting period. BIRN senior monitors helped with the introduction of this project and to assist in familiarising them with it, which enabled an efficient skill-transfer.

As a result of these trainings, the reporting skills of BIRN journalists, monitors, and researchers progressed. Each of them is now able to gather quantitative and qualitative data, to read public contracts and to turn them into reports and articles.

Macedonia

Ten workshops and trainings were organised over the course of 2017, providing more than a hundred journalists with the opportunity to boost their investigative skills. Trainings organised by BIRN Macedonia covered some leading international trends in modern investigative processes like digital forensics and data investigations, presenting a unique opportunity for local journalists to keep up with the contemporary reporting practices. The participants were a mixed group of journalists coming from national, regional and local media outlets.

Serbia

Two trainings, each including 20 people, were organized for representatives of the local CSOs:

1) Training concerning the participation of the broader public in the processes of defining, implementing and monitoring the public interest in what the local media informs them of;

2) Training for increasing the capacities of local CSOs for data collection, monitoring and evaluation of the states' media financing and its influence on public interest.

Regional projects focused on reporting about organised crime and corruption: one training for three analysts was conducted to prepare them for coding and analysing media monitoring data collected between April and July 2017; and there were two trainings for journalists.

BIRN Hub

Along with internal trainings for its staff, BIRN Hub organised trainings for journalists from the region and internationally.

Summer School of Investigative Reporting

BIRN Summer School of Investigative Reporting was held at the Astarea Hotel in Mlini, a town next to Dubrovnik, Croatia from August 20th to 26th 2017.

BIRN received over 100 applications for Summer School, of which over 20 were international queries.

BIRN's jury—composed of Gordana Igric, BIRN Regional director, Christian Spahr, Director of KAS Media Program South East Europe and Dobrina Trifonova KAS project Coordinator and Darija Fabijanac also from KAS Media Program, Blake Morrison lead trainer and Jelena Cosic, BIRN project manager—chose 20 Balkan-based investigative journalists and media professionals to participate, who also received a full scholarship for Summer School.

The participants were from Macedonia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Albania, Kosovo, Croatia, Romania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. Beside the 20 regional participants of the Summer School, it also welcomed 13 international participants from countries including Slovenia, Canada, Luxemburg, Greece and the Czech Republic.

The six-day-long training was held in hotel where all participants and trainers stayed.

The trainers were some of the most recognised and awarded investigative journalists and editors from Europe and USA. Sessions were designed to cover different skill sets from data, to in depth investigations, financial documents, geolocation and verification, arms trade and more.

Detailed Agenda can be found at: <http://birnsummerschool.org/agenda>

As of this year Summer School have new web page that was design only for Summer School: <http://birnsummerschool.org>

Resonant Voices Workshops

A series of interactive workshops were held in five Western Balkan countries, and were aimed at enabling critical voices to respond to dangerous messages and radicalisation online.

In cooperation with CIJA US and Talk 2.0, BIRN had organised workshops in Skopje, Tirana, Pristina, Belgrade and Sarajevo in participation with more than 80 activists, journalists, bloggers, educators, religious communities representatives and other online and offline influencers in order to assist in the development of online communication strategies to respond to dangerous content.

These workshops were held under the umbrella of the **Resonant Voices Initiative** – a project implemented by the CIJA US, BIRN and Talks 2.0.

The initiative aims to challenge extremist narratives in public discourse throughout the Western Balkans—in particular, those disseminating information online—and to equip critical voices in these target countries with the skills, know-how and resources to counter radicalisation, the recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters and violent extremists and other dangerous trends.

Investigative reporting training in Montenegro

In April 2017, a training in investigative journalism for journalists and editors was held in Montenegro, as a joint project with the partner organization CIN. The project, entitled “Investigate for ME and EU”, which the Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIN-CG) and BIRN implemented began in February. The training was followed by journalists pitching stories and working with BIRN editors until their texts were ready for publication.

Balkan Fellowship for Journalistic Excellence

The ten journalists selected for the Fellowship were introduced to the programme at the BFJE seminar, which was held in Vienna in late April.

The seminar was divided into group and individual training sessions to help hone in the fellows' professional approach to research and writing. The fellows from across the region introduced their projects to Timothy Large, programme editor and Gordana Igric, BIRN editor in chief. In addition, the fellows took part in workshops on planning, reporting, writing and producing photographs for their stories.

As part of the seminar programme, the fellows visited the offices of Austrian media partner Der Standard and attended an editorial planning meeting. The seminar also included a multimedia and mobile journalism workshop run by Gunther Müller and David Klein from Forum Journalismus und Medien; and a presentation on press freedom, defamation and journalists' legal rights by Barbara Trionfri, executive director of the International Press Institute.