

BIRN ANNUAL REPORT

BIRN
BALKAN INVESTIGATIVE
REPORTING NETWORK

2019



Our Mission

The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) is a network of non-governmental organizations promoting freedom of speech, human rights and democratic values in Southern and Eastern Europe. BIRN strives to empower people to access their rights by providing accurate and relevant information, as well as creating opportunities for them to participate in democratic processes.

Since 2005

We **protect** civil liberties and tell the under-reported and compelling stories of marginalized and vulnerable groups in South and Eeastern Europe and beyond.

We **expose** wrongdoings and corrupt practices and hold government accountable.

We **assist** in building a more viable and vibrant local media industry, providing hands-on support and ca-

capacity building of local media organizations, assessing their needs and helping them to boost their effectiveness. The focus being to strengthen their role as independent watchdog actors.

We **connect** with grassroots movements and CSOs, growing strong partnerships, whilst working towards more open and accountable public institutions, as well as to have an influence on policy making.

We **educate** and **support** journalists in Southern and Eastern Europe, boosting their skills, providing them with the financial support to tackle the most pressing issues, and creating opportunities for their networking and cross-regional cooperation.

We **promote** media independence through our transparent structure and established self-regulatory entities.

Letter from the Regional Director

Dear friends,

It is not easy to write an optimistic introduction to the work of an independent media organisation operating in South-East and Central Europe, where media freedoms have been deteriorating year after year, and where governments actively attempt to control the narrative and avoid any kind of accountability and scrutiny.

Through our reporting, we have identified several key trends: the rise of autocratic leaders, assaults on transparency and media freedom, disregard for the rule of law, growing challenges for civil society, as well as polarisation, demographic and social change, heightened geopolitical tensions in a fractious Europe.

Although the state of democracy in our region is deteriorating, and the situation often looks hopeless, 2019 also saw an increase in civic activism, protests and demands for accountability and change. Local

communities took the streets to demand clean rivers and less air pollution, women spoke out and united against powerful abusers, while citizens got together to assist growing number of refugees and asylum-seekers.

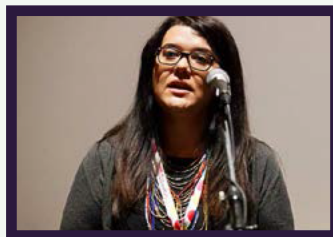
In an era of disinformation and controlled media, people also recognized the importance of uncompromised investigative journalism that holds governments accountable and exposes wrongdoings. We at the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network are proud to have been at the forefront of these efforts in 2019 as we revealed numerous corrupt deals, instances of nepotism and abuse of power, and many human rights violations.

This year we expanded to Central Europe with the aim of connecting journalists from the Balkans with their colleagues in Europe and collaboratively tackling challenges to our democracy. We also initiated the monitoring of digital rights and freedoms in Southern and Eastern Europe.

Our work didn't go unnoticed - our journalists won 19 prizes last year alone, while we supported through grants the work of 84 local journalists and numerous media outlets. Our pages were viewed 60 million

times, while more than 10 million people visited our websites. Our stories were republished 20,000 times by other media outlets.

We are thankful to our readers, partners and donors for trusting in us and standing by our side as we continue to work to make a genuine difference in these difficult times.



Marija Ristic

Regional Director of Balkan
Investigative Reporting
Network

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Media Landscape of Integrity and Reliability

BIRN has contributed to promoting the rule of law, accountability and transparency by exposing the transgressions of governments and individuals, as well as public and private companies. It has thus contributed to improving accountability and governance, by enabling the public in South-Eastern Europe to make more informed decisions.

Work of BIRN's journalists has additionally enhanced the application and use of access to information laws and, by doing so, has made a long-term contribution to the transparency and accountability of public institutions in the region. Our stories triggered official investigations and public inquiries. The network also worked towards more open and accountable public institutions, influenced policy making and built strong partnerships with grass-root movements and CSOs. We also launched several new initiatives aimed to respond to the rapid development of security, democratic challenges, shrinking civic space and threats on rights and freedoms.

Through its continuous and rigorous investigation of corruption, politics, economy, society, and reporting about war crimes, BIRN Hub gave insights that clarified political circumstances, financial malversations,

human rights violations, environmental erosion and legacies of the wars in the region.

Its cross-border approach shed more light on necessary but underreported stories about vulnerable groups in societies across this part of Europe. The list of the most important issues that our BIRN Network journalists tackled in the previous year includes but is not limited to marginalisation based on gender, nationality, sexual orientation, economic standing, age, as well as groups affected by wars, corruption, environmental and institutional negligence.

We worked collaboratively and closely with organizations and initiatives across the Western Balkan region, while in 2019, BIRN has launched new international projects and partnerships bringing international co-operation to a new level.

Through our joint reporting method that ensures the investigations and stories are more extensive and in-depth, BIRN Network continues to have an impact on the media landscape in the region, as well as internationally. Our interdisciplinary approach has been recognized through numerous awards in the previous year as we continue to stand for integrity and reliability in today's world.

Our Work in Numbers

Web analytics

Balkan Insight

3,12 million

VISITS

BIRN Network

10 million

VISITS

8,08 million

PAGEVIEWS

60 million

PAGEVIEWS

9,394

REPUBLICATIONS

19,133

LOCAL REPUBLICATIONS

Number of articles published

Balkan Insight

3,650 articles
33 investigations
365 analytical pieces
255 features
216 opinions
89 interviews

Reporter.al

1970 articles

Detektor.ba

1,838 articles
77 analyses
7 TV Justice episodes

Javno.rs

88 articles
18 videos
5 databases

Prizma.mk

640 articles

Kallxo.com

27,800 articles
43 Life in Kosovo TV debates
with **206** guests
33 Justice in Kosovo
TV reports
with **166** guests

Sinopsis.info

22 long form stories
7 podcasts

Number of grants for journalists and training sessions

85

NUMBER OF GRANTS FOR
JOURNALISTS

49

TRAINING AND
WORKSHOPS

1700⁺

PEOPLE TRAINED
(JOURNALISTS, CSO REPRESENTATIVES, STUDENTS AND OTHERS)

DONORS



Austrian Development
Agency (ADA)



Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung



Charles Stewart Mott
Foundation



Open Society Foundations



Civitates



Rockefeller Brothers Fund



Delegation of the European
Union to Montenegro



The Dutch Fund for Regional
Partnership / Matra



Erste Foundation



The Swedish International
Cooperation Development
Agency (SIDA)



European Commission

Partners



Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIN Montenegro)



Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers (SSNM)



The Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDs)



Danas



Internews



The Commission for International Justice and Accountability (CIJA)



der Standard



Neue Zürcher Zeitung



The ERSTE Foundation NGO Academy



Direkt36



Portal Novosti



The European Broadcasting Union (EBU)



Fundacja Reporterów



Propulsion Fund



The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)



Global Focus



SHARE Foundation



Süddeutsche Zeitung



The Media Association of South East Europe (MASEE)



Hromadske TV



The Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF)



Thomson Media GmbH



Impunity Watch



The BBC



Vreme.

Awards

Rexhai Surroi journalism prize [by Pristina-based media house Koha Group]

Award: Best Written Work of the Year

Winner: Serbeze Haxhiaj, BIRN Hub's programme Balkan Transitional Justice

Article [Kosovo's Invisible Children: The Secret Legacy of Wartime Rape](#)

EU Investigative Journalism Awards for Albania

Award: First Prize

Winner: Esmeralda Keta and Elisa Gjerani

Investigative article [Premature Baby Deaths Rise in Albania's Cash-starved Hospitals created through BIRN Albania's call for investigative grants](#)

EU Investigative Journalism Awards for Albania

Award: Third Prize

Winner: Ola Mitre

Investigative article [The Hidden Costs of Free Cardio Surgeries in Private Hospitals created through BIRN Albania's call for investigative grants](#)

Srdjan Aleksic Journalist Award

Award: Special Plaque

Winner: BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina

For continuous professional reporting over many years on the most sensitive issues, such as war crimes trials at the state court and the rights of marginalised groups

Cohu, the anti-corruption and good governance NGO

Award: Environmental Awards in Kosovo

Winner: Koha Ditore journalist Besnik Krasniq; RTK journalist Edona Musa; Drenushe Ramadani, a journalist from BIRN Kosovo's site Kallxo.com

For three journalistic pieces all supported by BIRN

EU Investigative Journalism Awards for Serbia

Award: Third Prize

Winner: Milos Stanic, an alumnus of BIRN's Balkan Fellowship for Journalistic Excellence programme, BIRN Hub

Investigative Article Toxic Taps: Arsenic in Water Stirs Cancer Fears

The Central European Initiative (CEI) and South East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO) Award for Outstanding Merits in Investigative Journalism

Award: Young Professional Journalists category

Winner: Arlis Alikaj, an alumnus of BIRN's Balkan Fellowship for Journalistic Excellence programme, BIRN Hub

Investigative article Chainsaw Gangs: The Plunder of Albania's Ancient Forests

EU Investigative Journalism Awards for Kosovo

Award: Second Prize

Winner: Serbeze Haxhiaj, BIRN Hub

Investigative article Kosovo's Political Murders: Unpunished, Not Forgotten

The Balkan Film Food Festival

Award: Fatos Baxhaku Prize - Best Documentary Film

Winner: Elton Baxhaku, BIRN Albania

For: Documentary 'Free Flow'

EU Investigative Journalism Awards for Bosnia and Herzegovina

Award: Second Prize

Winner: Semir Mujkic, BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina

For: Corruption in Public Procurements

The Macedonian National Council of the International Council of Museums

Award: Raising Awareness About the Poor Condition of Cultural Heritage in the Country

Winner: Goce Trpkovski, BIRN Macedonia
For: North Macedonia Leaves Priceless Heritage at Risk

Stanislav Marinkovic Award [by daily newspaper Danas, in Serbia]

Award: Journalistic Courage and Special

Achievements in Research and Analytical Journalism

Winner: Slobodan Georgiev, BIRN Serbia and Tatjana Lazarevic, editor-in-chief of the KoSsev website from Mitrovica in Kosovo

For: Overall work

Partners Albania for Change and Development

Award: The White Dove Award

Winner: BIRN Albania

For: The civil courage, professionalism and objectivity shown with investigative reports with a wide public impact

The South East Europe Coalition of Whistleblower Protection

Award: Free Speech Award

Winner: Klodiana Lala, a journalist for Albania's News 24

For: A story she produced using a BIRN reporting grant

The Independent Journalists Association of Serbia, and the US embassy

Award: The Best Investigative Journalism Story

Winner: Jelena Veljkovic, BIRN Serbia

A series of research articles (1), (2),(3), (4), (5) about illegal construction work on Mount Golija

Investigations
and Stories
that Mattered
the Most



Bombs and Bullets: Fear and Loathing in North Kosovo

Candles burn in tribute to Kosovo Serb politician Oliver Ivanovic, who was murdered in front of his party's headquarters in the northern Kosovo town of Mitrovica on January 16, 2018. Photo: EPA-EFE/Djordje Savic

Last year, BIRN published the last interview ever conducted with Oliver Ivanovic, a Kosovo Serb leader murdered in early January in the town of North Mitrovica by unknown assassins. He had named Milan Radoicic – a debt collector and truck owner close to Serbia's ruling party, later also a politician – as a key figure in the intimidating system of power in mainly Serbian northern Kosovo.

Almost two years after the murder, Kosovo's Special Prosecution has charged six people with involvement.

The prosecution claims that an organised criminal group run by two well-known Kosovo Serbs from Mitrovica, Milan Radoicic and Zvonko Veselinovic, were behind the murder. Further investigations by BIRN revealed their dodgy businesses dealings.

The Ivanovic murder case is really just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to unsolved cases of political violence within the Serbian community in northern Kosovo. BIRN has catalogued 74 attacks on Kosovo Serbs involving guns, grenades, arson or explosive devices since 2014, the year the Srpska Lista party first took power after landmark local elections. Targets have included politicians, members of the police or security forces, journalists, entrepreneurs and employees of state institutions. None of these cases has led to a prosecution.



Vanishing Sands: Montenegrin Island Threatened by State Inaction

Environmentalists warn that Montenegro is likely to run out of beach space in five years' time, as its tourism boom continues. At the same time, erosion by the sea, the damming of rivers and rampant construction have combined to create a perfect storm, threatening the country's beaches. At greatest risk are those where developers have dammed or diverted mountain streams that feed the coastline with sand and gravel, a BIRN investigation has revealed.

One of the threatened places is the popular tourist destination Ada Bojana, which has a unique ecosys-

tem. Its disappearing act is visible to the naked eye. The flow of deposits to the sea has been cut by about 30 per cent, and sand has been excavated indiscriminately. The capacity of the Bojana riverbed is now 2.5 times less than it was three decades ago. Its flow has been disrupted by dumped waste and the construction of some 600 holiday homes.

According to the BIRN investigation, done in collaboration with the Centre for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro, CIN-CG, the measures taken by the state to halt the destruction have been sporadic and so far, insufficient.



Croatia Key to Ukrainian Far-Right's International Ambitions

Illustration: BIRN

From World War II revisionism to fights for independence, nationalists from both Croatia and Ukraine see much in common in their countries' recent histories.

The BIRN investigation revealed that the far-right Azov movement, founded in 2014 to help defend Ukraine against invasion by Russian-led proxy forces, is forging ties with like-minded politicians and war veterans in European Union-member Croatia.

As part of our Resonant Voices Fellowship, Michael Colbrone showed that the newest member of the

European Union, a country where conservative currents are strong, is emerging as a key staging ground for the movement. For some white supremacists in Croatia, meanwhile, the war in Ukraine is part of a “struggle for the white European race, its culture and history”. The reported growth of the Azov movement is bringing hope to some of these white supremacists that their own homeland could be a base to further the dream of building “a Europe of the nations”.

Our Resonant Voices fellows also looked at other far-right movements – from identitarians in Serbia to far-right movements and parties in Austria and Germany.



Kosovo's Invisible Children: The Secret Legacy of Wartime Rape

Photo: Ilir Blakçori <http://molosgroup.com/heroinat-memorial-2/>

Thousands of women were victims of sexual violence inflicted by Serbian forces during the war in Kosovo from 1998 to 1999, which NATO brought to an end by ending Serbia's rule in the former province. Humanitarian organizations working in Kosovo have reported that between December 1999 and February 2000, at least 100 babies were born in Kosovo as a result of rape. The total figure remains unknown. These babies have been either kept secret, given up for adoption or raised in orphanages.

BIRN was able to confirm four such cases. Two of these babies were abandoned at birth, one mother kept the birth a secret, and another killed her baby only hours after giving birth.

For this story, our journalist, Serbeze Haxhiaj, was given the 2019 Rexhai Surroi journalism prize for the best-written work of the year. The jury called it an extraordinary story that had resonance beyond Kosovo's borders.




Online Abuse Now Commonplace for Balkan Women Reporters

Illustration: Trembelat

In a 2018 survey by the Washington-based International Women's Media Foundation, IWMF, nearly two-thirds of women journalists who responded said they had been threatened or harassed online at least once. The Balkan region is no exception to this trend.

Female reporters across the Balkans are frequent victims of harassment, especially on social media – an indispensable tool for journalists, but at the same time the platform that simultaneously exposes them to praise and persecution.

Most of these reporters never get justice. According to the findings of the BIRN report, they often see little point in complaining to their employers or to the police, given what critics say is a systematic failure to punish the perpetrators.



Serbian Arms Case Whistleblower ‘Wanted the Truth Heard’

In October 2018, our editor received a phone call from a man who said he had documents proving the involvement of the father of a Serbian cabinet minister in the arms trade. We accepted his “offer” to share the documents with BIRN and established a channel of communication.

It was the start of a story – based on leaked official contracts – that would blow the lid on the role of Interior Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic’s father, Branko, in

the purchase of cut-price arms from a state-run factory and their sale to Saudi Arabia.

In a functioning democracy, prosecutors would act and heads would roll. In the case of Serbia, it was different. The man who called BIRN as the whistleblower, Krusik arms factory employee Aleksandar Obradovic – was picked up by armed police at his workplace and put behind bars.

Obradovic, who is still on trial for allegedly exposing state secrets, became a symbol of the voices against corruption. Speaking to BIRN in his first interview after leaving Belgrade Central Jail, Obradovic explained what led him to release the information. Although the government denies wrongdoing, the documents we published are irrefutable, and the Krusik case will not go away.

It stands as a litmus test of the Serbian government's readiness to confront the corruption and abuse of power that have undermined Serbia's transition to democracy since Slobodan Milosevic's fall in 2000 – and of the resolve of journalists with integrity to hold it to account.

What began as a story about a cabinet minister using his position of power to secure favourable terms for a firm connected to his father, has grown into a political scandal that threatens the credibility of the Serbian government – unless it acts.



Unsafe Haven: Balkans Sees Rise in Turkish Asylum Requests

Photo: EPA-EFE/Erdem Sahin

The fate of alleged supporters of the exiled Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen in the Balkans has become more uncertain lately, with many countries considering Turkish demands to extradite them. The latest case concerns Fatih Keskin, director of the Richmond Park School chain in the northwestern Bosnian city of Bihac. Bosnian police arrested him and revoked his permanent residence permit in December on the basis of documents seen by BIRN that cited “threats to national security”.

A Sarajevo court later overruled the detention order, meaning that Keskin eventually walked free, though he remains subject to strict restrictions on his freedom of movement.

As BIRN investigation has discovered hundreds of Turkish citizens have applied for asylum in Balkan countries since a failed 2016 coup, seeking protection from a crackdown being waged by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan well beyond the borders of Turkey. Altogether, more than 250 Turkish citizens have submitted asylum requests in Kosovo, Bosnia, North Macedonia and Bulgaria since 2016, according to figures obtained by BIRN.

The EU and international rights group say Erdogan is using the coup attempt as a pretext to silence dissent. Ankara, for its part, says the scale of the crackdown simply speaks of the depth of Gulen's reach in the Turkish state.

But Erdogan has not stopped at the borders of Turkey. Across the Balkans and elsewhere, his government has pursued those linked to Gulen, both through covert means and through strong-arm tactics backed by Turkey's diplomatic and financial clout in the region.

Turks who spoke to BIRN say they live in constant fear that weak authorities in Balkan states will buckle under the pressure. Judging by the figures, many see formal asylum as their only possible protection.

A photograph of a man holding a young child. The man is wearing a white t-shirt with a dark stripe on the sleeve and has a large, dark, tribal-style tattoo on his right forearm. The child is wearing a white sweater and a floral-patterned skirt. They are outdoors, and the background is blurred, showing other people and lights, suggesting a fair or festival setting.

Blind Justice for Romania's Trafficked Roma Children

A man holds a child at a fair in the Romanian town of Tandarei. Photo: Andrei Pungovschi

In Tandarei, a small town in southeastern Romania, lives Titi, the alleged kingpin of a notorious gang. Along with 25 other men, Titi, a Roma himself, is accused of trafficking scores of Roma children to Western Europe for a life of forced criminality. Two of his sons are also amongst the accused gang members.

Prosecutors described the group's alleged deployment of an army of children to panhandle and steal. Even an eight-week-old baby was trafficked into service – as a prop for begging, drugged to keep quiet.

Investigators showed that Titi's empire spanned the corners of the EU, from Spain and Italy to France and even Norway – and especially Britain.

Dozens of Romanians in Britain and Romania were arrested after an unprecedented joint investigation that lasted four years. But justice hasn't played the same in the two countries. In Britain, around 100 people have been convicted of crimes ranging from trafficking and money laundering to benefit fraud, forging documents and child neglect. In Romania, all 26 of the accused were acquitted in a shock verdict in February – after a nine-year, stop-start trial.

As the appeal trial of Titi and his co-accused got underway this spring, BIRN spent months combing through court documents and interviewing people close to the case to understand the scale and complexity of the alleged criminal enterprise in Tandarei.

The picture that emerged was of a closed and marginalised Roma community in thrall to a local mafia that preys on poor families, enslaving their children through a pernicious form of debt bondage. The court records and expert interviews also cast light on how the wheels came off a trial that many saw as a test of

Romania's commitment to tackling modern slavery.

The story won first prize at our Balkan Fellowship for Journalistic Excellence.



Bosnia Struggling to Prosecute Migrants when Identity in Doubt

Tents at Camp 'Vucjak' in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Photo: EPA-EFE/FEHIM DEMIRIllustration. Photo: Pixnio

On their way to Western Europe, the vast majority of migrants and refugees from North Africa and the Middle East enter Bosnia before moving swiftly across the next border into Croatia – where they find their path frequently blocked by Croatian border police. This is creating a growing bottleneck in north-western Bosnia.

Many of these migrants, particularly if they are of a nationality unlikely to receive refugee status in West-

ern Europe, discard their identity papers; some claim to be minors, while others give false names when stopped by police.

An investigation by the BIRN uncovered discrepancies in the way courts in Bosnia deal with the issue of establishing their identity, meaning not everyone is getting equal treatment. The problem has become more pressing since Bosnia became the new bottleneck on the “Balkan route” to Western Europe for migrants and refugees, with more than 60,000 registered temporarily in the country in the past two years.

In Bosnia, 262 felonies have been registered as committed by migrants so far in the north-western Una-Sana Canton, where most end up as they try to enter Croatia.

BI

SERBIAN LED PROJECTS WON BY A NETWORK OF POLITICALLY CONNECTED FIRMS

We identified 14 public lighting contracts won by the same network of politically connected companies in Serbian towns and municipalities where the ruling Progressive Party is in power.

Illumination of Serbia, Hungarian Style

Total value
of contracts
€2.70 million



Graphic: BIRN

Relations between Serbia and Hungary could hardly be better, flourishing on the basis of what critics say are the shared authoritarian tendencies of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Besides the political ties, business deals are thriving too. Since 2016, a group of Hungarian, Serbian and Slovenian companies have won public contracts worth more than 25 million euros to refurbish street lighting in a number of Serbian towns and municipalities where the country's ruling Progressive Party, SNS, was or is in power.

An investigation by BIRN and Direkt36 shows that the companies that led the process are all connected to businesspeople close to the inner circles of Orban, Vucic and Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic. The group includes Balint Erdei, a friend and former business partner of Orban's son-in-law, Istvan Tiborcz, as well as Radovan Djumic, whose company Keep Light is prospering thanks to the public contracts it is winning, Dragoljub Zbiljic and Nenad Kovac, businessmen both with links to the SNS, and Mark Crandall, a former boss of Brnabic.

The arrangement echoes a scheme investigated by the European Union's anti-corruption arm, OLAF, in which public lighting in Hungary was refurbished by Elios Innovativ, a company once run by Tiborcz and Erdei. The Serbian government claims no crime or wrongdoing has taken place. On the contrary, it continues to award Elios-linked companies tenders to light up Serbian towns.



‘Epic’ Serbian Arms Deal Led to Pierced Skulls in Baghdad

Riot police fire tear gas during clashes between Iraqi security forces and anti-government demonstrators, at Khilani Square in Baghdad, 2019. Photo: AP Photo/Khalid Mohammed

Hailed in Serbia as the “deal of the century”, the 2008 Iraqi arms agreement saw Serbia committing to export pistols, bullet-proof vests, ballistic equipment, mortars, Lasta military training aircrafts and military-grade tear gas grenades to Iraqi government forces battling sectarian militants.

The 40-mm M99 grenades – far heavier than the tear gas canisters used by police forces around the world to control civil unrest – arrived in four shipments in 2009 to Baghdad, BIRN revealed. A decade later, Iraqi

government forces used them to disperse protesters in the capital, Baghdad, to deadly effect.

Military-grade grenades manufactured in Serbia and Iran were responsible for at least 20 of the more than 400 deaths reported since the protests started in October, piercing the skulls of those they struck, according to rights watchdog Amnesty International.

Iraqi authorities have insisted they did not import the deadly grenades, blaming a “third party” that was trying to undermine the government and stoke instability. A BIRN investigation, however, has found that the Serbian grenades were indeed part of the 2008 Iraq-Serbia arms deal, with the Iraqi Defence Ministry specified as the end-user.

In collaboration with Amnesty International and via eyewitness accounts and analysis of photographs and serial numbers, BIRN has traced the weapons to the central Serbian ammunitions producer Sloboda Cacak, and the path they took to Iraq via the Serbian state-owned arms intermediary Yugoimport-SD-PR – the company that, in defiance of United Nations sanctions, built the Baghdad headquarters of Saddam Hussein’s ruling Ba’ath party and at least five underground bunkers in the 1990s.

Programme Highlights and Impact

Along with Southeast European countries, which have been the focus of its work for the past 15 years, in 2019, BIRN Hub extended publishing and training activities to the countries of Central Europe, Ukraine and Turkey. To address the issue of rising authoritarianism and the phenomenon of the captured state in Central, East and Southeast Europe, BIRN Hub and its partners in 2019 launched a project called Reporting Democracy (RD), whose stated aim is to unleash the power of independent journalism in scrutinising the issues, trends and events shaping the future of democracy in the region.

The three-year project Strengthening Quality News and Independent Journalism in the Western Balkans and Turkey, also launched in 2019, involves ten partners from seven countries, awarding the best investigative journalistic stories, publishing in media outlets across the region, providing training, monitoring, mentoring and networking opportunities.

As part of the project Mapping Digital Freedom Violations, started in 2019, fifteen monitors work to determine who are the key players when it comes to disinformation and propaganda in Southern and Eastern Europe, covering digital threats and reporting on digital freedom violations.

The research carried out by the fellows of the Resonant Voices Initiative tracked the evolution of links, networks and cooperation between transnational extremist groups. It investigated disinformation campaigns run by governments and extremist groups and their effects on polarisation and radicalisation in more than 15 different countries in the EU and within its neighbourhood.

Through its Balkan Transitional Justice (BTJ) programme, BIRN continues to promote best practice among local media outlets in reporting on often sensitive post-conflict transitional justice issues. In 2019, BIRN Hub has published an updated and improved version of the War Crimes Verdicts Map, an interactive tool that offers an overview of all public available court rulings on the crimes committed during the wars of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia by the ICTY, as well as those by national courts.

Taking into consideration the armed conflict in Ukraine in recent years and the fact that few media outlets cover its consequences from the point of view of transitional justice, BIRN has decided in 2019 to launch a project as a part of its Transitional Justice Programme – Justice Report Ukraine, in cooperation with the Ukrainian media outlet Hromadske.

Through the programme focused on investigative journalism – Paper Trail for Better Governance – BIRN Kosovo and BIRN Hub are focussed on uncovering violations of the rule of law, corruption, the rise of far-right politics, the arms trade and cigarette smuggling, as well as the malign influence of regional and international political forces. These stories continue to create a significant international impact when published.

Participants at the Summer School had an opportunity to learn various investigative journalism techniques and skills – such as geolocation, chronolocation, the essentials of open-source data from Strava, Google Maps to Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, data scraping, tracking offshore companies, tracking planes and ships, - from some of the leading journalists and trainers from across the world.

Some of the stories published within BIRN Hub's Balkan Fellowship for Journalistic Excellence (BFJE) put a sharp focus on the problems of the marginalised groups in the region. They also covered topics related to the environment, digitization, and corruption.

The regional portal Balkan Insight provides international news, analysis and investigations into political,

economic, and social issues, as well as transitional justice, corruption affairs and media freedom. Along with gaining a worldwide readership, Balkan Insight has become a reliable reference for reputable media outlets, reports of international organisations, scholarly articles and books. Several of its journalists, fellows and alumni have been awarded nationally and internationally for their reporting.

Transitional Justice Initiative

In 2019, BIRN's Balkan Transitional Justice continued to be the leading regional platform covering war crimes trials and other important transitional justice topics. As the countries of former Yugoslavia are still lacking a proper process of dealing with the past, and that war crimes trials are not in the forefront of the mainstream media – it is crucial to have a media outlet that will cover given topics on a regional level, by providing high quality and fact-based reports.

With over 1500 articles on transitional justice in English and local languages, digital resources published and conferences and trainings organised, BIRN has been recognized as a credible source by many lead-

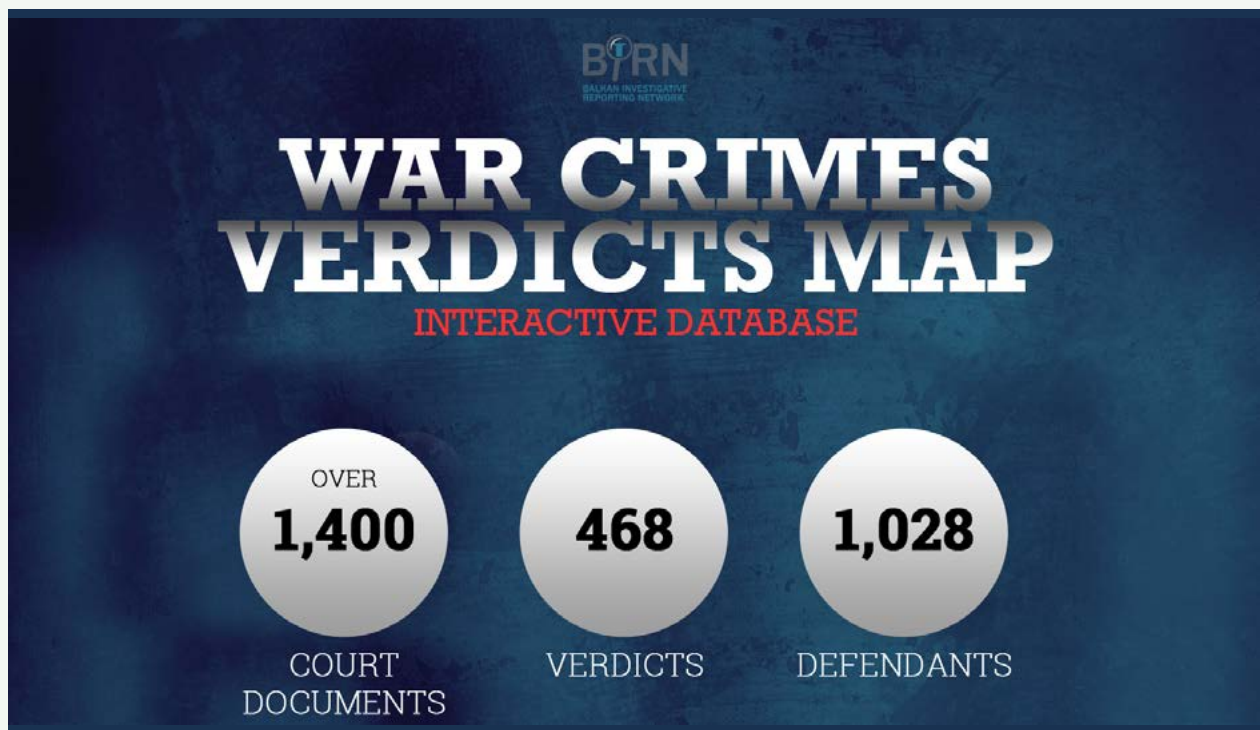
ing international and regional organizations from the field: The International Center for Transitional Justice, Impunity Watch, The International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (Mechanism), Dealing with the Past, OSCE, UNDP, Bonn International Center for Conversion, Humanitarian Law Centre, Youth Initiative for Human Rights and Civil Rights Defenders. BIRN was also quoted in scholarly texts, such as The dissertation Remembering Wartime Rape in Post-Conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina, submitted at the School of Social and Political Sciences University of Melbourne and in the books published during 2019: Central and Southeast European Politics Since 1989, The Legacy of Ad Hoc Tribunals in International Criminal Law, International and Transnational Crime and Justice, Opposing Colonialism, Anti-Semitism, and Turbo-Nationalism.



In the scope of its journalistic production, BIRN's BTJ team published numerous data-driven multimedia and cross-border investigations, as well as an e-book [Radovan Karadzic: Wartime Leader's Years on Trial](#). The e-book was published prior to Radovan Karadzic's verdict before the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, and it contains all BIRN reports on this landmark case. BIRN also had a [live blog](#) on the day when the final verdict was handed, where the audience could follow the latest developments during the trial.

BIRN has published an updated and improved version of the [War Crimes Verdicts Map](#), an interactive tool that offers an overview of all public available court rulings on the crimes committed during the wars of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia by the ICTY, as well as by national courts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia, Croatia and Montenegro. In the updated version of the map, users can now search by defendants' names, the units to which they belonged, the courts and countries in which the courts are located, the crime locations and the dates. Users can also access court documents and BIRN reports on each case. The map is based on over 1,400 court documents. The number of verdicts included is now

468, with a total of 1,028 defendants. In the future, the map will also include verdicts handed down by the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals and the Kosovo Specialist Chambers in The Hague.



In addition to the regular monitoring of war crimes trials and reporting on transitional justice in the Balkans, BIRN aspires to provide journalists from other regional media outlets with the knowledge and opportunity to report on dealing with judicial processes in their respective countries. That is why BIRN gave 1000 EUR grants to twenty journalists from the Western Balkans, to each write one in-depth story on tran-

sitional justice issues in the Balkans. Journalists, under the mentorship of BIRN, produced and published 11 out of 20 stories in 2019, all of which were published on the Balkan Transitional Justice website, translated into BCMS, Albanian and Macedonian languages and offered to local media outlets for republication.

In addition, BIRN organised training and study visits for journalists from post-Yugoslav countries. In co-operation with the UNDP, BIRN organised a training for journalists on reporting about war crimes trials and transitional justice topics in the Balkans. Twenty five journalists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia participated in the programme. In December 2019, BIRN organised a study visit to The Hague for ten journalists from the Balkans. During the study visit, participants met with representatives of the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, International Commission for Missing Persons, and for the first time a group of journalists from this region visited Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office.

As the number of ongoing war crimes trials is declining, BIRN has decided to take a new approach and in addition to regularly monitoring war crimes trials, turn to exploring court archives. The archives of lo-

cal and international courts are a repository of documents with important information about crimes committed during the wars in the former Yugoslavia. As only final verdicts usually reach the public, these documents often remain neglected. Besides the extensive use of court documents in its reporting and data-driven investigations, BIRN decided to expand the usage of court archives by providing individuals interested in transitional justice processes the opportunity to explore archives through BIRN's grant schemes. As part of this initiative the BTJ team selected 20 artists, journalists, historians and activists who will receive a 2,000 EUR grant to create small projects based on the archives of the ICTY and local courts that dealt with war crimes cases. There will be a total of 18 small projects and they will be developed throughout 2020. Selected projects include a variety of topics, such as internally displaced persons, sexual violence in conflict, economic crimes during the war, the role of music in conflicts, etc. Projects will also have different forms - from journalistic pieces to websites, documentaries and educational tools.

Considering the armed conflict in Ukraine in recent years and the fact that few media outlets both locally and internationally cover its consequences from the

point of view of transitional justice, BIRN has decided in 2019 to launch a project as a part of its Transitional Justice Programme – Justice Report Ukraine, in cooperation with the Ukrainian media outlet Hromadske. The aim of the project is to strengthen in-depth reporting on transitional justice, to contribute to a better informed citizenry that is engaged in the democratic process, while the journalists are assisted to build skills and knowledge to cover topics related to conflict, truth, justice, accountability, memory, institutional reform and other issues related to transitional justice.



Having 15 years' experience of reporting on transitional justice in the Balkans, spreading its work in the field to Ukraine, is a way to share acquired know-how, which will in the future cover other countries with the

same need for balanced and resourceful reporting on transitional justice.

In cooperation with Hromadske, BIRN gave 1000 EUR grants to eight Ukrainian journalists, for each to develop one in-depth story on transitional justice in Ukraine, under the mentorship of BIRN editors. Previously, all journalists had a training held by BIRN's experienced pool of journalists, editors and transitional justice experts. Five out of eight journalists were from Hromadske, while three were from other local media outlets. All eight stories were produced and published by both BIRN and Hromadske in English, Russian and Ukrainian languages. This was the first media co-production between media organizations in Ukraine and the former Yugoslavia that aimed to share know-how on transitional justice processes and the role of media in reporting conflict. As well as producing new journalistic material, Hromadske journalists organized a number of community events, aimed to increase the reach of their stories.

Capacity Building and Strengthening of Independent Media

Through the project Strengthening Quality News and Independent Journalism in the Western Balkans and Turkey, BIRN Hub, as the project lead, and its partners Thomson Media GmbH (TM), the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), European Broadcast Union (EBU), Central European University (CEU CDMS), Media Association of South-East Europe (MASE), Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIN CG), Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers in North Macedonia (SSNM), BIRN Albania, BIRN Serbia and Association of Journalists from Turkey) aim to enhance trust among citizens in the media and create a safe environment for journalists to produce independent news content, through training, mentoring, technical, financial support and publishing.



EU Award for investigative journalism in Turkey.

The project aspires to provide, over the course of three years, structural support to media freedom and integrity in the Western Balkans in the following countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey. Through activities focused on production and publishing of quality news and investigative stories, six mainstream media outlets from five countries produced in total 312 articles, out of which 144 were in print and 168 in digital. A total of 21 EU awards for investigative journalism were presented in seven countries, to 30 journalists. Furthermore, the journalists from public broadcasters have been focusing on constructive journalism and comparative analysis. EU Award for investigative journalism in Turkey.

Journalist from Kosovo – RTK (Radio Television of Kosovo) has produced and broadcasted two one-hour stories about returning ISIS fighters coming back from Syria to Kosovo and the challenges awaiting the government of Kosovo in dealing with them ([link 1](#); [link 2](#))

Albanian journalist – RTSH (Radio Television of Albania) produced a story on two hydropower plants to be built in a national park, thus creating environmen-

tal issues. The residents of a nearby local town are opposed to the new energy plants and are engaging in legal protest. The following [link](#) contains the story broadcasted on the [evening news](#) on RTSH.

Journalists from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BHRT – BiH Radio Television), Montenegro (RTCG – Montenegro Radio Television) and Serbia (RTS – Radio Television of Serbia) have visited Finland during a study trip organized by BIRN. The study trip was a chance to produce stories related to education, social welfare and maternity benefits. The idea behind this was to use this field trip as research on good practices, and how developed countries deal with societal issues and how those examples could be transferred to the region. They had meetings in Finland with various institutions regarding various topics including: homelessness the education system, treatment of newborns and new parents. The series of stories have come out of this visit on all three public broadcasters. Two stories in Bosnia: [BHT – Homeless people in Finland and BiH](#) and Serbia: [RTS – Finland’s formula for homeless people on the issue of homeless people](#); Three stories about education in Bosnia: [BHT – Finland: Best education in the world](#), Serbia: [RTS – Kids in Finland go to school in socks](#) and [Montenegro: Learning](#)

[about education from Finland](#); Finally three stories on new mothers and newborns were published in Bosnia: [BHT – Baby boxes in Finland and new mothers in BiH](#), Serbia: [RTS - Box-cradle: How Finland helps new parents](#) and in Montenegro a [story of newborns in Finland](#) as part of the evening news on RTCG.

Investigative Reporting Initiative

This programme consists of several projects dealing with investigative journalism; as part of its investigations, BIRN focused on the rise of far-right politics, cigarette smuggling, the arms trade, and malign influence of regional and international political forces. During the reporting period, the stories we published resonated across Europe - from the UK parliament to local city halls. BIRN also ran a series of in-depth investigations that dealt with [global tobacco smuggling](#), that were featured on the front page of the Montenegrin daily newspaper DAN [as a breaking news story](#). Additionally, after the BIRN investigation, the Industry Committee of the Egyptian Parliament requested that the country's

state prosecutor start a criminal investigation into cigarette smuggling.

BIRN's investigation, Illumination of Serbia, Hungarian Style, has been shortlisted for the annual Dejan Anastasijevic Investigative Journalism Award handed out by the Independent Association of Serbian Journalists, NUNS.

Working in collaboration with researchers from the human rights group Amnesty International, BIRN published another hard-hitting investigation in mid-December, 'Epic' Serbian Arms Deal Led to Pierced Skulls in Baghdad. After Amnesty International published the report claiming Serbian and Iranian-produced tear gas grenades were used by Iraqi security forces to disperse anti-government protesters in Baghdad, BIRN revealed that the grenades were part of an arms deal between Belgrade and Baghdad and shipped directly to the Iraqi Defence Ministry in 2009. Eyewitness accounts and analysis of photographs and serial numbers helped BIRN trace the weapons to the central Serbian ammunition producer Sloboda Cacak and the path they took to Iraq via the Serbian state-owned arms intermediary Yugoimport-SDPR.

BIRN continued following this story, [reporting on findings](#) that Iraqi security forces intended to kill or maim protesters when they fired Serbian- and Iranian-produced tear gas grenades at demonstrating crowds in Baghdad. The investigation was republished in several regional media outlets, such as [Express](#), [PC NEN](#), [Izdvojeno.ba](#), [Gazeta Tema](#), [Reporter.al](#), [Time.al](#), [Kallxo](#) and [Javno](#).



Iraqi protesters in Tahrir Square, central Baghdad, in 2019. Photo: EPA-EFE/MURTAJA LATEEF

BIRN managed to secure the continuation of the programme for an additional three years, this time focusing on judiciary, illicit financing, the environment, privacy, surveillance, data tracking and gender inequalities.

2019 **BIRN Summer School** of Investigative Reporting

- Learn from world-class trainers
- Discover investigative tips and tricks
- Network with international experts

BIRN SUMMER SCHOOL
OF INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING
birnsummerschool.org

Another important investigative journalism project is BIRN Summer School of Investigative Reporting. It is an internationally recognized, week-long training held annually since 2010, aiming to build capacities of journalists (20 from SEE and 10 internationally) to professionally conduct investigations which would expose country-based and cross-border criminal offences. In 2019, the Summer School welcomed lecturers: Blake Morrison, chief investigative editor from Reuters; award-winning investigative journalist Frederik Obermaier from the Süddeutsche Zeitung; Benjamin Strick, an open-source investigator for the BBC and Bellingcat; Olaf Sundermeyer, ARD's journalist and author; Cinematographer Andrew Baker; Dragana Peco,

investigative journalist at KRIK and OCCRP; Christo Buschek, programmer and data specialist and Ivana Jeremic and Ivan Angelovski, editors at BIRN.

During the week-long sessions, participants at the Summer School had an opportunity to learn various investigative journalism techniques and skills. Lectures included: how to approach stories and find the right words to craft them; the art of interviewing as one of the foundations of successful investigations, and how to properly pitch story ideas. In the era of fake news and loose information, the Summer School also provided reporters with comprehensive knowledge of verifying leaks and filtering data and fact-checking. They had the opportunity to learn about the newest trends on open data and open source tools: geo-location, chronolocation, the essentials of open-source data from Strava, Google Maps to Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, data scraping, tracking offshore companies, tracking planes and ships. Journalists also learned how to make investigative reporting visual and incorporate multimedia into their work, and the crucial skills they need for successful fieldwork. The importance of cross-border cooperation of journalists in the SEE region was underlined in Frederik Obermaier's evaluation: "The BIRN Summer School

offers an amazing learning environment for investigative journalists – I am confident that this year’s participants will work together in the future in desperately needed investigations in the region”. A total of ten journalists that attended the Summer School and made good pitches, were divided into six teams and received 1,200 EUR grants each to conduct an investigation with the mentorship of BIRN editors. Their investigations are soon to be published on the BIRN flagship, Balkan Insight.

During the reported period, BIRN has also published the Freedom of Information and Journalists in the Western Balkans: One step forward, two steps back report on FOI laws and practices in the Western Balkans. BIRN journalists collected data from 854 Freedom of Information requests in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

Reporting and Monitoring Human Rights and Freedoms

Balkan Fellowship for Journalistic Excellence

In 2019, ten fellowships were awarded to journalists who participated in the programme for professional development, including story grants, editorial mentorship and training in writing long-form articles.

All awarded journalists highly appreciated the opportunity to gain international experience and collaborate with colleagues from the region. They assessed the Fellowship as one of the best programmes in terms of structure and support given to participants. The participants specifically highlighted the experience of working with a dedicated editor/mentor, as an experience that will have a profound effect on their future work.

The overall topic of the BFJE 2019 was 'FREEDOM'. Published stories covered a variety of possible looks at the state of freedoms in the region – from ecological

and economic freedoms to freedom of speech, political organizing and failures of justice. The first prize was awarded to Ani Sandu for an investigation into the trafficking of Roma Children to Western Europe, the second prize went to Shkumbin Ahmetxhekaj for investigating the proportions and impact of medical brain drain in Kosovo, and Kostas Zafeiropoulos came third for his work on cyber propaganda.



As of 2020, the Balkan Fellowship for Journalistic Excellence was extended to the Visegrad region (Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland), following the deterioration of the media situation in these coun-

tries and the interest of journalists to have access to additional funding and professional development opportunities. The newly branded Fellowship for Journalistic Excellence programme is keeping the key elements of the previous BFJE concept (initial seminar, mentoring support and editorial sessions), which has been fine-tuned throughout 12 years of implementation and is globally recognized as a highly successful professional development model.

Reporting Democracy

The Reporting Democracy (RD) project was piloted in the second half of 2019 to establish an international journalism network and distribution platform aimed at strengthening the capacity of media to report systematically on populist, authoritarian and other illiberal trends in the Visegrad countries and Western Balkan countries and thus to contribute to public understanding of these trends and their consequences.

The biggest success in the short period since the project was launched is that processes and networks are in place for further expansion. Moreover, the concept has been broadly welcomed and validated by stake-

holders. The Reporting Democracy initiative was launched publicly on May 31, 2019, with the Reporting Democracy Conference in Budapest, attended by around 100 people, including prominent academics, journalists and activists who discussed challenges and opportunities facing democracy in Visegrad nations and the Balkans.

With more than 120 applications already in the first year of the implementation, we were able to support the work of around 30 journalists in the Visegrad and Balkan regions.

The biggest challenge was to establish RD as a relevant source of information in the Visegrad countries and to get other reputable media on board. To that end, we have initiated special collaborative projects with media partners. The first such project examined how the fall of the Berlin Wall resonated in countries behind the Iron Curtain 30 years ago, and what it means for them today. As a result of the extensive and relevant coverage of the Visegrad region, our readership from Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland has grown on average by 38% in the second half of 2019, compared to the same period in the previous year. RD stories were republished 182 times,

including republications and quotations in the Guardian, Washington Post, Al Jazeera, BBC, EU Observer, der Standard, Council of Foreign Relations and other reputable news sources.

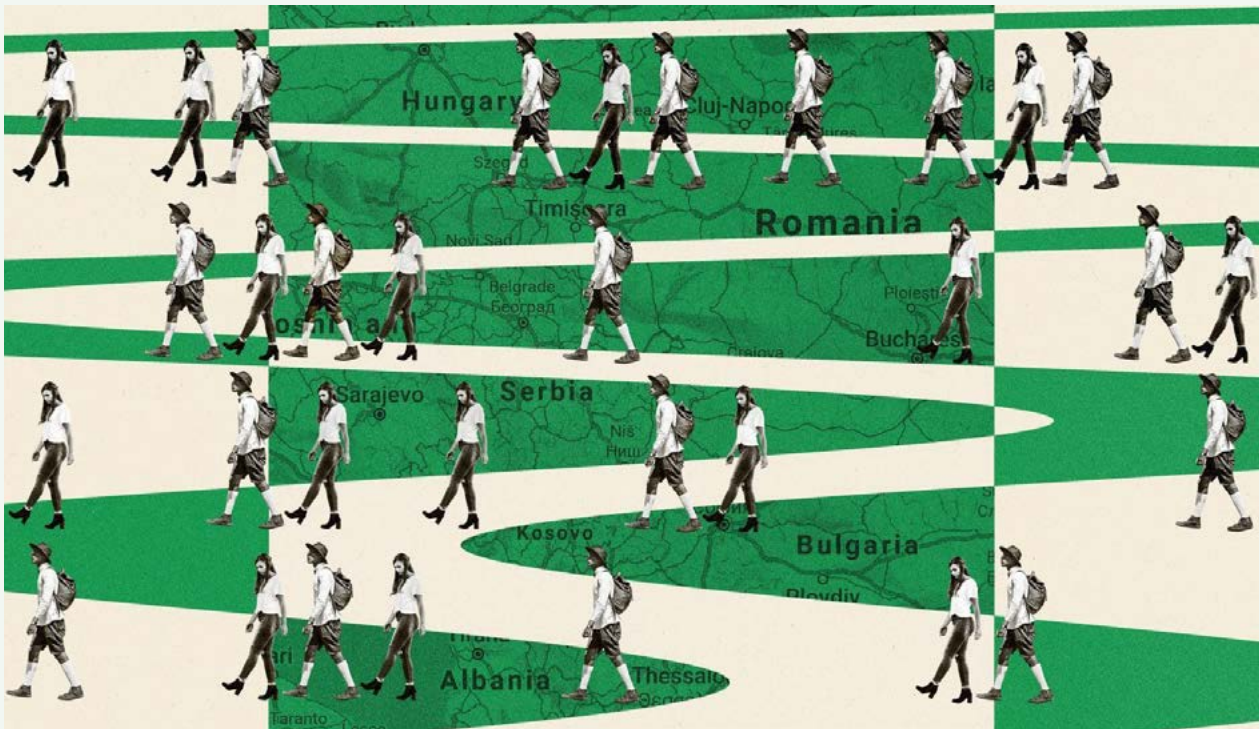


Illustration: Ewelina Karpowiak/Klawe Rzeczy

The most attention was brought to the [Buy-buy Balkans - A regional Critical Demographic Decline](#), a series of ten stories dealing with the demographic changes facing the CEE region. These stories alone were republished more than 30 times across the region and Europe and were widely informing policy makers debate about the brain drain and depopulation in the region and its effects on democracy, including the

presentation at the UNFPA annual conference, the Aspen conference and the annual meeting of WB6 parliamentary deputies for EU integration.

Resonant Voices Initiative

The Resonant Voices Fellowship is a unique programme for investigative journalists and reporters willing to cover under-reported topics linked with the spread of hostile, biased and inaccurate narratives. The Resonant Voices Initiative targets the Western Balkans diasporas as a particularly sensitive group, which is often neglected. BIRN published four out of eleven stories produced by the Resonant Voices Fellows in 2019. Stories covered the wide range of topics from far-right groups' activities and collaborations, their influence on media and the diaspora's voting habits, as well as the role of identitarian movements in Balkans.

One of the most-read stories from the programme reveals how the far-right militant movement in Ukraine is forging ties with like-minded politicians and war veterans in EU member Croatia. RVI stories were published in multiple languages, depending on the story's topic.

Nearing elections in Austria, one of the [stories](#) from 2019, dealt with the influence on the Serbian diaspora in this country. The story addressed the matter of desirable and less desirable migrants in Austria, while explaining how sensitive political and historical questions can be used by politicians to ensure the votes of Austrian Serbs in the upcoming election.



Illustration: Ewelina Karpowiak/Klawe Rzeczy

An investigative story, [We Are Their Voice: German Far-Right Builds Balkan Alliances](#), which came out last year, highlighted the existing classification of migrants based on islamophobia and racism. The story shows the absurdity of anti-migrant stands by emphasizing

the example of a politician of Serb origin, who himself came to Germany as a refugee, but now uses dangerous rhetoric against less desirable refugees, predominantly Muslims. Anti-Muslim bigotry heavily influences the Balkans as a post-conflict area, where 25 years ago people were systematically killed because of their religion. This story was also translated and published in BCMS, as well as in the respected Serbian weekly newspaper Vreme both in print and online publication.

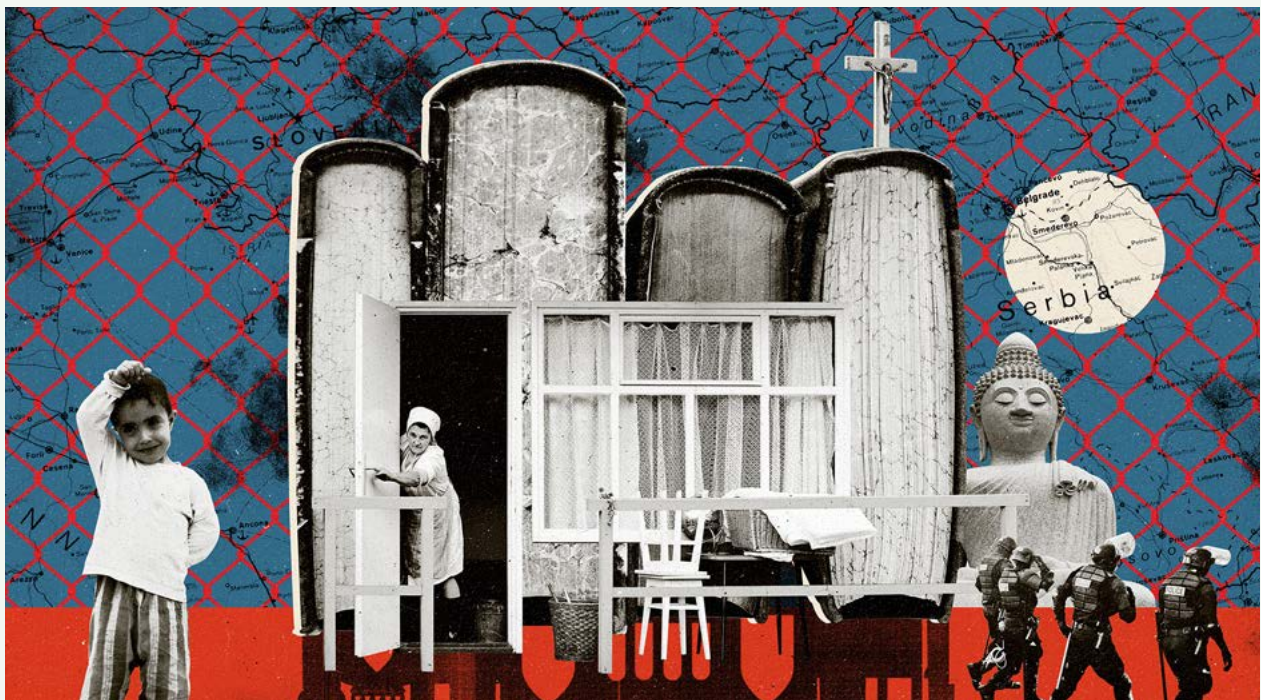


Illustration: Ewelina Karpowiak/Klawe Rzeczy

One particular story that explored the interorganisational connections and modus operandi of Identitar-

ians in Serbia was republished by prominent media outlets, such as Foreign Policy. This particular publication used the findings from this article to explain how Europe's nationalists are becoming internationalists.

Highlights from the Network

In 2019, **BIRN Albania's** reporting was focused primarily on exposing the cases of corruption, impunity, organised crime and abuse of power of high-level officials, as well as supporting civil society's actions advocating for human rights and media freedom. As a result of its work in previous years, BIRN Albania was given the White Dove Award by Partners Albania for Change and Development for its investigative reporting.

The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network in Albania was given the White Dove award by Partners Albania for Change and Development for its investigative reporting.



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BIRN Albania's documentary Free Flow, produced in 2018, which chronicles the efforts of local communities, environmental organisations and activists in Albania to halt the destruction of the precious Valbona and Vjosa rivers, now under threat by the Albanian government attempting to build numerous hydro-power plants, was screened at the European Parliament in March 2019, while also winning the Best Documentary Award in the Balkan Film Food Festival in October of the same year.

Over the course of 2019, 33 investigations were published at Reporter.al – BIRN Albania's publication that in 2019 marked its fifth anniversary - either carried out by the newsroom staff, or by local journalists that were trained and mentored through the calls for proposals organised in 2019.



Some of the stories created a significant impact. For example, BIRN published an investigation by a local journalist, supported through a call for proposals. The investigation was based on wiretap records and documents from the Prosecution Office for Serious Crimes and revealed allegations of voter fraud from local officials and ties to organised crime in at least four regions of Albania. The story has become the battle cry of the right-wing opposition accusing Prime Minister Edi Rama of ties to organised crime and voter fraud. Journalist Klodiana Lala was given the Free Speech Award by the South East Europe Coalition of Whistleblower Protection for this story. Three more Albanian journalists supported through investigative grants during 2018 have won the first and third prize at the EU Investigative Journalism Awards organised in Tirana in September 2019.

In order to increase the capacities of local journalists in investigative and specialised reporting, during the period January – December 2019, BIRN Albania has provided on-the-job journalistic training, incorporating mobile journalism, and mentoring for 25 local journalists awarded with reporting grants for covering cases of corruption and the lack of transparency in several fields including housing and property rights,

labour rights and education. The selected reporters have undergone a process of continued on-the-job training and mentoring from the BIRN editors.

In order to raise the level of reporting and information on the central government's investments at the local level, BIRN Albania has developed an interactive database and mobile application with open data on more than 570 projects in all the 61 municipalities of the country. For the development of the Urban Renaissance online database, BIRN Albania has sent more than 150 FOI requests to more than 70 institutions during 2018 and 2019, whilst gathering and publishing more than 800 public contracts and 1000 photos related to these projects.

BIRN Albania also launched a new online database that compiles and classifies its coverage of the vetting process of judges and prosecutors in Albania. The database contains news, analysis and asset evaluation reports of all the judges and prosecutors who have undergone the vetting process from January 2018 until the present by the vetting commission and the College of Appeals – the special chamber of the Constitutional Court.

As this was an electoral year, to better inform the citizens on the wealth of the heads of local government

in the country, as well as the integrity of the asset declaration system, BIRN Albania published a study report Analysis of the System of Asset Declarations of Mayors in Albania.

BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina continued covering transitional justice issues and monitoring war crimes court cases, as well as investigating corruption, and reporting about other sensitive issues in the society.

For reporting on the legacy of the 1992-95 Bosnian war, BIRN BiH was honoured with a special plaque by the 2019 Srdjan Aleksic Journalist Award and short-listed for a Fetisov Journalism Award.

BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina was honoured with a special plaque at this year's Srdjan Aleksic Journalist Award.

A database of Bosnian government official vehicles, a project of the BIRN BiH, has been awarded by the EU Investigative Journalism Award in 2019 and shortlisted for the 2020 Sigma Awards for data journalism.

During the year, the journalists monitored in total 84 war crimes cases before the BiH courts, including two remaining cases tried before the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT). BIRN

BiH produced and aired seven TV Justice episodes covering transitional justice and security topics. In total, 18 outlets broadcast TV Justice across the country and via satellite signal.



BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina was honoured with a special plaque at this year's Srdjan Aleksic Journalist Award.

The BIRN BiH journalistic team reported on war-time sexual violence, resulting in new testimonies and court data, along with writing about the victims of genocide, missing persons and reparations to the victims of torture. The story [Bosnian War Rape Convicts Compensate Victim for First Time](#), published in September 2019 by both Detektor.ba and Balkan Insight drew particular international (as well as region-

al) attention. It was also quoted widely in Romania, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic.

The organisation reported also on the migrant crisis, in particular in regards to the state's response to processing asylum requests, accommodating them in various makeshift centres, often not of satisfactory standards for protecting the health and human rights of the asylum seekers.

Several initiatives by BIRN Bosnia have had an impact in the public life of the country. Before the appointment of the new State Prosecutor, BIRN BiH sent a request to the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council (HJPC) asking for proposed plans and programmes of all candidates for the position. Following our request, the HJPC made all proposed programmes by the candidates available on their website.

After BIRN BiH published research on the connections between the biker group Night Wolves and politicians in Republika Srpska working to expand Russian influence in BiH, the Minister of Energy in the government of that entity was almost dismissed. This was partly due to citations from the BIRN BiH investigation regarding the minister's connection with Goran Tadic, the vice president of Night Wolves in BiH, whose busi-

ness had received favourable concessions. The investigation was presented in Washington DC at the Innovation Research Interchange (IRI) conference, and was also mentioned in the US Congress.

BIRN Kosovo has worked with the goal of increasing access to accurate information and fostering public debate by investigating, writing, publishing and broadcasting televised programmes on issues relevant for the citizens of Kosovo, such as consumer protection law, public spending, environmental protection (associated with building hydro-power plants and air pollution), female empowerment and engagement, preventing violent extremism, unemployment, parliamentary elections, access to justice and wartime sexual violence, as well as the devastating earthquake in Albania in 2019.

BIRN Kosovo focussed its efforts towards making more peoples' voices heard across the region - voices of marginalised and vulnerable groups, victims of wars, corruption, women, the youth, and different communities across Kosovo. One of the aspects of this approach was that in line with its objective to gender mainstream in all project phases, BIRN has put special attention into reaching a satisfactory rate of female participants for all its training activities.

BIRN Kosovo has been reporting on female empowerment and issues that women face on a daily basis, such as inheritance of property rights and registering of property, issues regarding the non-majority communities in Kosovo, especially the situation in the Serbian community through 15 televised Life in Kosovo and Justice in Kosovo debates and reportages. BIRN Kosovo has also been implementing programmes that focussed on the efforts to expose and punish crime and corruption.

BIRN Kosovo hosted a series of debates ahead of Kosovo's parliamentary elections, with the candidates for prime minister invited to present their plans for government to a team of civil society experts. In the build-up towards Kosovo's parliamentary elections on October 6, BIRN Kosovo invited all the candidates for the prime minister to appear in a televised debate. Flanked by a team of ten MP candidates from their respective parties and coalitions, each candidate unveiled his plans for governing in front of a team of 24 experts invited by BIRN, who provided further questions and scrutiny.

In 2019, BIRN Kosovo organised trainings, covering fake news, fact-checking, basics of investigative journalism, and advanced investigative journalism, tele-

vised investigations, media ethics, source protection, reporting on terrorism, violent extremism and radicalisation, environmental issues and effective advocacy. The organisation delivered a total of 23 training sessions and workshops, attended by 441 participants.



Kosovo Tv Debate

Within a Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund project, BIRN Kosovo organised four training events on the Types of Violent Extremism and Reporting Terrorism Cases with students from Mitrovica, Ferizaj and Pristina. The training was delivered to 153 journalists and students of the law and journalism departments at their respective universities.

As part of the project, Support to Civil Society and Media Initiatives, BIRN Kosovo provided small and medium sized grants to 32 beneficiaries including journalists and local media organisations, as well as another seven small grants to civil society/media organisations as a part of the Balkan Monitoring Public Finances project funded by the EU. The total number of small and medium grants that BIRN provided in 2019 is 39.

Three stories, all of which were supported by BIRN, were awarded the prize for best environmental reporting by COHU, an anti-corruption and good governance NGO.

BIRN Kosovo has been working towards increasing transparency and accountability of public institutions through the monitoring of the Tax Administration of Kosovo (TAK) and recruitment processes of higher positions in Kosovo's institutions. The goal of monitoring TAK's work has been to identify the loopholes in its processes and raise 'red flags' regarding the need for improving professional standards, procedures and the overall legal basis of TAK.

BIRN Kosovo held a training session with the General Auditor and 23 officials from the National Audit

Office (NAO). The training courses were intended to improve the performance of the Auditor General and National Audit Office staff in reporting and providing information on public spending and improving the performance of that institution's staff during public appearances and on social media.

Active citizenry is seen as crucial to the mission of BIRN Kosovo, and by conducting constant fieldwork through which the organisation observes the needs of the society, we aim to provide recognition to peoples' movements and also strengthen them.

BIRN Macedonia in 2019 covered the following topics: elections, name change of the country, EU and NATO accession bids, media and campaign finance, anti-corruption reforms in the country, investigations on the UNESCO's protection of Ohrid, media freedom, judiciary and corruption, as well as regional developments. The landmark year of political events began with the finalisation of the Prespa agreement which put to bed the decades-long name dispute with Greece and resulted in the country changing its name to the Republic of North Macedonia. Soon after the agreement was approved by the Greek parliament, the focus had shifted to presidential elections and the bid for the EU accession talks. BIRN provided

analysis and reported on shortcomings and emerging problems in the work of the Special Prosecution and continued to follow in-depth the struggle by authorities to restrain massive buildings in the centre of the capital, which has resulted in various urban infrastructure problems, rampant pollution and a major decrease of green areas.

Extensive research has been conducted into the state of the judiciary, looking at different issues that have been highlighted both by domestic and foreign experts: impunity of officials, prosecutors abusing office and the misuse of detention as a punitive measure.

In 2019, BIRN Macedonia journalists closely followed developments in the media industry and analysed media reforms. It followed advertising spending during elections and revealed that in the period of 2010-2017 over 25 million euros were funnelled into three private broadcasters for the propaganda of former PM Nikola Gruevski. BIRN analysed the funds that media outlets received from political parties during the presidential election campaign and published investigation about media clientelism on the local level.

In May 2019, BIRN Macedonia journalist Goce Trpkovski was given an award by the Macedonian Na-

tional Council of the International Council of Museums for raising awareness about the poor condition of cultural heritage in the country.

A BIRN Macedonia editor was a member of a selected group of CSO representatives attending the public hearing sessions for selection and assessment of the candidates for members of the state anti-corruption commission. The result of the extensive hearings was the new composition of the Anti-Corruption Commission and the civil society representatives played a vital role as they had an opportunity to not only question the candidates but also to expose if in the past they were involved in activities that presented a conflict of interest or could otherwise compromise the position of the anti-corruption body. Her involvement in the selection process of the new state anti-corruption commission members comes as a response to the long-term commitments and reporting focus of BIRN to report and uncover high-level corruption and criminal cases in the country.

The German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) and BIRN have developed a new guide for investigative journalists on Open Source Intelligence. The guide is designed to assist journalists in their research and investigations, especially with regard to

Open Source Intelligence techniques. It supplies a variety of tools for operational security, as well as documenting and archiving. It provides ways to navigate search engines, social media, assists with image verification, geolocation, data handling, searching different corporate registers and metadata research, and assists in investigating the “dark web”.



BIRN Macedonia published ten video tutorials aimed to support the journalists while working on investigative reporting. The videos provide journalists with guidance through the fact-verification process, helping them to analyse public finance data and investigate officials' properties. They also teach journalists how to use the central registry data for their investi-

gations, as well as what the ethical standards of the investigative process are.

BIRN Serbia predominantly reported on corruption, public finances, financial crimes, illegal construction and the rule of law.

One of the most notable cases BIRN Serbia reported about was related to the weapons factory Krusik in Valjevo and the involvement of senior state officials in its murky dealings. Following this extensive investigation in 2018, in which BIRN highlighted the crime and corruption in the arms trade business. The story continued further in 2019 (Serbian Minister's Father Joined Arms Delegation on Italian Visit, Serbian Minister's Father Visited Saudi Arabia With Arms Firm) and developed an international dimension. The investigation about the involvement of the minister of interior's father in the shady business of selling arms and ammunition to Saudi Arabia, some of which ended in Yemen, showed the scale of corruption in the administration and became probably the most significant political crisis of the Progressive Party's eight years in power.

In 2019, BIRN Serbia journalists received important awards for their work. In May, BIRN Serbia journal-

ist Jelena Veljkovic was awarded a prize for the best investigative journalism story in Serbian online media. Slobodan Georgiev, an editor at BIRN Serbia, won the Stanislav Marinkovic Award, awarded by the Belgrade-based daily newspaper Danas. According to the jury, Slobodan Georgiev and BIRN Serbia addressed numerous important and controversial issues and broadened the boundaries of investigative journalism in Serbia.

BIRN Serbia, in partnership with CEPRIS (Judicial Research Centre), have followed the work of the special prosecutor's office and courts in the first comprehensive attempt to monitor court cases and mark important trends related to their conduct. Our monitoring has included focussing on efficiency, transparency and accountability, whilst cross-checking these with the image conveyed to the public through the mainstream media. As part of the partnership, BIRN and CEPRIS have developed a set of processes for journalists regarding training, research, monitoring, advocacy, and informing the public.

BIRN Serbia is a part of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) Initiative, an international initiative aiming to make governments more open, accountable, and responsive to citizens. As a member of the state-

formed working group drafting a new Activity Plan for OGP and through the improvement of the Media Register, BIRN has highlighted the subject of transparency in tracing budgetary money spent in the media sector.

BIRN Serbia's representative participated in the drafting of the Media Strategy, adopted in January 2020, after several months of delay and four amendments to the text. The Media Strategy is meant to trace the future development of the media sector in Serbia but also to map the existing problems and offer policy solutions.



Project All Eyes on Justice

As a part of the in-house capacity building programme, BIRN Serbia continued to work with digital editions of national daily Danas, of weekly publication Vreme, and seven local portals from across Serbia, who managed to improve their editorial standards

and attract new readers through the process. BIRN Serbia also organised a two-day training course on media and security in the digital environment for online journalists and editors. Twelve participants learned how to overcome security challenges, risks and were introduced to digital tools that can help them in their future work.

In 2019, **BIRN Romania** initiated the project Moldova – Romania: A Network of Stories, in order to support mutual understanding among people from Moldova and Romania. We have created a network of human interest stories (online and audio) related to what it means to be a Moldovan and Romanian citizen today, in an era of geopolitical tensions and radical social change. In the course of the year, the organisation trained eleven journalists from both countries in order to produce long-form, in-depth stories, and then to publish them on a local and international level.

The project created an e-book, It Would Not be Bad to be Good, containing ten stories that were published, together with relevant background information. Publishing was accompanied by producing seven podcasts featuring interviews with prominent public personalities discussing diverse aspects of Romania-Moldova connections.

BIRN Hub's Financial Data

	Note	2019 BAM	2018 BAM
Donor contributions	3	4,144,320	3,558,462
Other income	4	48,510	34,154
Total income		4,192,830	3,592,616
Personnel expenses	5	(161,368)	(170,476)
Other operating expenses	6	(3,905,539)	(3,419,491)
Depreciation		(3,152)	(7,109)
Total operating expenses		(4,070,059)	(3,597,076)
Finance income		475	276
Foreign exchange losses (net)		(7,680)	(6,931)
Surplus of expenses over income		115,566	(11,115)