



# **BIRN NETWORK ANNUAL REPORT 2020**

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The global pandemic has posed additional challenges to the societies in the Western Balkans, in parallel with the ongoing shrinking of freedom of speech and decreasing media freedom in each state. The independent media in the region have also faced unprecedented incursions such as political pressure, economic insecurities, and violent attacks on journalists.

The Western Balkan public authorities also did not make freedom of information a priority. On the contrary, many countries restricted access to information, especially during declared states of emergency.

European Commission reports for the Balkan countries criticized the low level of institutional transparency and expressed concerns about legal mechanisms not functioning in general.

Independent media have faced significant challenges, although investing significant effort to penetrate the public sphere and provide the public with factual and unbiased information. Aside from addressing the devastating effects of fake news and preventing COVID-19 related disinformation from reaching the broader public, autonomous media outlets in the WB states have faced severe political and economic pressures and threats to journalists. Emerging authoritarian regimes in the SEE and WB region have strengthened the role of pro-government mainstream media, intensifying the devastating effects of censorship and self-censorship, disregarding media-related regulations and laws.

The coronavirus crisis has put additional pressure on free media, whether through obstructions, threats, arrests or aggravated financial difficulties. The media landscape in the WB countries can be characterized as a captured space by those in power, leaving limited opportunities to hold accountable those responsible for impairing media transparency and pluralism while allowing misinformation to shape public opinion.

Working harder in 2020 than probably any other year before, BIRN strived to maximise its influence and contribute as much as possible to its foreseen stratified impact – ***‘People have increased access to accurate information’ and ‘People have increased influence on democratic processes’***.

**PEOPLE HAVE  
INCREASED ACCESS  
TO ACCURATE  
INFORMATION**

# BIRN AND ITS PARTNER MEDIA INFORM PUBLIC AND STEER PUBLIC DEBATE WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON CORRUPTION, FACING THE PAST, ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND MEDIA FREEDOM

Despite the challenges during 2020, BIRN Network focused its work on reliable, high-quality and investigative journalism, monitoring of human rights violations and judiciary, transparency and accountability of public institutions and support to local media and journalists in the SEE region.

Recognised for its work, BIRN journalists received 17 awards in 2020, including the prestigious European Press Prize and Press Freedom Award by the Reporters without Borders.

Readers also recognised our effort by visiting our publications in record numbers – across the network BIRN had 75 million page views, 14 million visitors (4 million more than last year). Through different platforms: online and TV and different languages: English, Serbian, Bosnian, Macedonian and Albanian, BIRN published almost 42,000 articles, that received 45,000 republications in local and international media, more than double compared to the last year.

This is an increase of almost 10 000 articles more than in 2019; increase in visits for 4 million people comparing to last year and almost doubled number of republications, exceeding the indicators set in the result three. The increased production can be explained in more urgent need for quality information amid the global pandemic, rise of disinformation and need for more fact-checking and in parallel, growing number of political and economic turmoil, foreign influence, rise of extremism and rule of law and human rights violations that BIRN journalists exposed and reported on.

Key areas BIRN journalists reported on included pandemic, migrant crisis, accountability and transparency of public institutions, corruption, transitional justice, digital rights, organised crime, gender justice, organised and cross-border crimes and environment.

In the reporting period, BIRN largely focused its coverage on challenges posed by the global pandemic and has [created a special focus page on its flagship website Balkan Insight](#) and [dedicated live blog](#) that provided hourly updates on COVID-19 situations in the region. Considering the scale of the pandemic, the grave situation in which societies in the Balkan region are currently in, and the need for credible and reliable information, BIRN plans to continue its dedicated coverage until the pandemic is over or scaled. BIRN live blog remains the only one that covers the whole region of South-east Europe and is often quoted and referred to by local and international media.

BIRN Network members also have dedicated in-country coverage of coronavirus pandemic and are regularly exchanging and cross-publishing content relevant from other countries. In Serbia, BIRN published an investigation [Serbia Under-Reported COVID-19 Deaths and Infections, Data Shows](#) <sup>[1]</sup> that showed that the government concealed the COVID-19 death toll ahead of the elections. The story was quoted locally and internationally more than 600 times, while many civil society organisations, health officials and politicians called for government accountability. As a result, Serbian government promised to revise its current health information system. In Kosovo, BIRN stories [highlighted security issues around COVID-19 hospitals in the capital Pristina](#), showing there is no proper control or protection of those who visit the medical institutions. Following BIRN reporting, the security system was revised. BIRN also produced more than 20 cross-border stories focusing on regional trends in handling global pandemic including [effects on labour flow from the Balkans to the EU, governments curb on information laws](#), and [impact on small communities](#) that BIRN produced together with five local media outlets across the Balkans.

A special focus of BIRN in Albania during has been on the [expulsion from Albania of asylum seekers](#) (Gylenists) from [Turkey](#) and the on [the living conditions of migrants and refugees in Albania](#), which have been the reference to international human rights reports on the country, as well as official statements of members of EP toward the Albanian Government.

<sup>[1]</sup> For this story, BIRN journalist Natalija Jovanovic won the CEI SEEMO Award for Outstanding Merits in Investigative Journalism, by the Central European Initiative CEI and the South East Europe Media Organisation SEEMO. In December, the Human Rights House in Serbia awarded Natalija Jovanovic for her outstanding commitment to the protection, respect, and promotion of human rights.

In North Macedonia, BIRN continued to follow judiciary reform steps and major corruption and official abuse court trials and also exposed weaknesses in selection of lay judges, which prove to be prone to corruption and can seriously affect trials, as well as serious lack of digitalization and connectivity between courts. After the summer elections, both issues were included in the strategy of the new justice minister.

BIRN continued to follow changes in the media landscape, with stories on media ownership and especially public funding of private media. In this period we focused on the money the state would be spending for political advertising for online websites. At the same time BIRN put on pressure on political parties in North Macedonia to disclose what they were financing and to establish a practice that parties have been reluctant to follow to allow more transparency of their finances. BIRN also investigated a group of dozen media companies linked with capital coming from Hungary. [BIRN revealed that a number of media and other companies](#) in North Macedonia, Serbia, Romania and Slovenia have modest annual profits that cannot sustain, but seem to serve as a proxy for illegal financial or direct state funds from Hungary.

It is worth highlighting that during 2020, BIRN publications led to more than 90 direct impacts in Kosovo, most in the corruption and economy sector.

On April 23, 2020, as a result of BIRN's reporting during an operation in cooperation with Kosovo Police, on smuggling networks in North Mitrovica where initially 29 suspects were arrested, the Special Prosecution of Kosovo filed indictments against six police officers and two smugglers. Additionally, after a year-long investigation into a number of illegal casinos operating on the Kosovo-Serbia border, on October 9, 2020, Justice in Kosovo broadcast the first episode of the "Crime in Karaceva" series revealing that even officers from the Kosovo Police were involved in the gambling networks. Out of this operation and BIRN's reporting, more than 50 people have been arrested in connection with the Karaceva case.

Also, an Energy Regulatory Office decision that granted 28 million euros of state funded tariff incentives to private companies in the solar energy industry was reversed following a BIRN investigation, after the investigation revealed that Blerim Devolli was behind six companies benefitting millions of euros from the state funded incentives tariffs on the solar energy market, breaking anti-monopoly regulations. As a result of BIRN reporting, administrative investigations were initiated towards three judges, leading to disciplinary commissions being established.

## OTHERS QUOTING BIRN

BIRN stories were quoted by the leading global news and investigative media, including The Washington Post, New York Times, Atlantic, Guardian, EUobserver, Der Spiegel, Time, derStandard, CNN, Foreign Policy, National Public Radio, Al Jazeera English, MSN – Microsoft News, Forbes, Politico, Aftenposten and many others. Locally, BIRN stories were published by public broadcasters (RTK live, RTV SLO, RTS, BHRT), TV stations with a national reach and cable (TV N1, Al Jazeera, TV Nova S, Dukadjini, Top Channel), print publications (Danas, Politika, Vreme, Nedeljnik, NIN; Vijesti, Pobjeda; Jutarnji list, Slobodna Dalmacija; Mladina; Dnevni Avaz, Oslobodjenje, Tema; online publications in all the countries of the region, including radio stations.

BIRN's work was also often quoted in the reports by International Commission on Missing Persons, Voice of Europe, Foreign Policy Research Institute, Council of Europe, Boston University, Human Rights Watch, Committee to Protect Journalists, Stanford Internet Observatory, Cambridge University Press, International Press Institute, Amnesty International, Reporters without Borders, Center for European Studies Harvard, Civil Rights Defenders, Institute for International Affairs (Italy), European Council on Foreign Relations, European Data Journalism Network, Freedom House, London School of Economics, SpringerLink, Feminist Current, Ethical Journalism Network, The Atlantic Council, The Coalition for Women in Journalism, European Funds Recovery Initiative, Poynter, European Forum for Democracy and Security, OSCE, CIMA.

When it comes to cross-border journalism there were a number of investigations leading to calls for prosecution, establishment of independent inquiries and reactions from civil society and independent groups.<sup>[2]</sup>

<sup>[2]</sup> following BIRN investigation [Son of Fugitive Ex-President Builds Raspberry Fortune in Serbia](#), new government in Montenegro renewed a request to extradite Svetozar Marovic, ex-president of the former State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, from Serbia.



BIRN's work was referenced number of times by the European Parliament study [Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them](#) and briefing about [impact of the pandemic on elections around the world: From safety concerns to political crises](#). BIRN's work was also quoted by the Global Initiative Against Organised Crime in their study [TRANSNATIONAL TENTACLES – Global Hotspots of Western Balkan Organized Crime](#) and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung about media in the Balkans [The Shrinking Space for Media Freedom in Southeast Europe in the Midst of Covid -19 Pandemic and State of Emergency](#).

Balkan Insight was quoted several times in a book: [Reporting Facts: Free from Fear or Favour \(UNESCO\)](#), and an academic article: [The Western Balkans during the pandemic: Democracy and rule of law in quarantine?](#) (SAGE Publications). Balkan Insight was also referenced several times in the book [Foreign Policy Making in Southeast Europe in Times of the Pandemic](#) published by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

BIRN Network journalists, editors and programme managers, recognised for their expertise and professionalism, were invited to take part in more than 100 debates hosted by other organisations including the OSCE, European Union, European Digital Rights Network, Columbia University, International Republican Institute, state institutions from the Western Balkans, civil society organisations and media organisations.

BIRN remains the only media outlet that continuously reports from the war crime trials in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo. BIRN's team of journalists and editors produced 599 articles related to transitional justice topics in English and 1,797 in Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian, Albanian, and Macedonian languages. All produced articles were published on [Balkan Transitional Justice online platform](#), together with the translation to different languages – on [detektor.ba](#) in Bosnian and [kallxo.com](#) in Albanian. Articles were republished 3,953 times by various international and regional media outlets, confirming once again that BIRN is the leading credible source of information in the region.

During 2020, BIRN journalists in Bosnia and Herzegovina monitored in total 61 war crimes cases before the Court of BiH, as well as two remaining cases tried before the Mechanism for International Criminal Tribunals in The Hague. Also, BIRN BiH had a live coverage of Ratko Mladic appeals hearings in August 2020. Additionally, BIRN BiH produced and aired 7 episodes of [TV Justice](#), a monthly 30-minute programme that covers transitional justice in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

BIRN Kosovo produced and aired 5 episodes of [Justice in Kosovo](#), TV program that covers war crime trials and related topics in that country.

After BIRN published an investigation about unprosecuted war crimes in Bosnian town of Fojnica back in 1993, prosecution called witnesses for interrogations. BIRN reporting about a Serbian war criminal that escaped prison sentence, also initiated responses from civil society groups, locally by Belgrade based [Youth Initiative for Human Rights](#) and internationally Human Rights Watch. For its work in the field of transitional justice, [BIRN was given the top journalism award Europe Press Prize](#). BIRN regional director Marija Ristic also received Reporters without Borders Press Freedom Award for the Network's dedication [to the promotion of human rights and justice for the victims](#).

In the reporting period, BIRN produced and published 20 videos in the scope of its online social media campaign entitled [‘If you were here’](#). BIRN journalists interviewed twenty family members of missing persons who are still searching for their parents, children, spouses, and siblings, in order to raise public awareness about the issue. By using personal stories and oral history, the campaign has faithfully conveyed the problems and suffering faced by the families of missing persons from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, and Serbia. Among the interviewees were men and women of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, which only emphasised the regional nature of this problem. All videos were uploaded to [BIRN's YouTube channel](#) and extensively shared and promoted on Balkan Transitional Justice [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) channels. In total, the ‘If You Were Here’ campaign gained over [32,000 views on Facebook](#) and over [71,000 impressions on Twitter](#).

In December, BIRN hosted an art exhibition of drawings based on research into Hague Tribunal's archive material about mass graves of Kosovo Albanian war victims in the Belgrade suburb of Batajnica. Vladimir Miladinovic's drawings based on evidence about the Serbian authorities' attempted cover-up of the wartime killings of Kosovo Albanians went on display at an [exhibition entitled ‘Counter-Archive’](#). At the opening, actors Masa Djordjevic and Nikola Stankovic read from court testimonies given by victims' relatives and by people who participated in transporting the bodies from Kosovo to Serbia and hiding them. This was the first time BIRN used art and collaborated with artists in order to present its stories to the wider public.

In an attempt to get closer to the communities that BIRN reports about, an event was organised in Athens that included reading out [the story about refugee situation in the Balkans](#) and to which – more importantly – young male refugees and asylum seekers were invited, in order to share their reflections on it, as well as their own experiences as unaccompanied minors. BIRN fellow Stavros Malichudis had followed young male refugees and asylum seekers that had arrived in Greece as unaccompanied minors, recording their lives and digging into the challenges they experienced. During his research, he met unaccompanied minors living for months in grim conditions in the Fylakio and Amygdaleza detention centres, underage boys harvesting strawberries in Manolada and others living on

the streets or sharing flats with up to 20 of their compatriots, while working on the “grey” market. The article was published in both English and Greek. It was also translated into Pashto, Arabic, and Urdu, to be shared with the refugee communities, through the social networks they use to communicate and exchange information along the refugee route.

BIRN in Bosnia and Herzegovina also conducted a campaign entitled [‘Forgotten Victims’](#), aimed at raising awareness about unprosecuted war crimes. It also continued to report on wartime sexual violence, writing [88 articles](#) in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian.

# JOURNALISTS HAVE IMPROVED SKILLS IN INVESTIGATIVE AND SPECIALIZED REPORTING

BIRN held 63 trainings and workshops and trained 1300 people, and provided 188 grants, which is almost 100 more than in 2019. This was a strategic move of the organization with an aim to curb the effects of the pandemic on the media landscape in the Balkans and support independent media organisations and journalists in need with funds and know how support.

In line with its objective to mainstream gender equality, BIRN placed a particular focus on having a satisfactory number of female participants in its training activities. On a regional level, out of 90 journalists and editors trained for citizens' journalism 46 were women and 44 men. This represents a standard for BIRN trainings to include at least 50 per cent of women as participants.

As part of the "[Strengthening Quality News and Independent Journalism in the Western Balkans and Turkey](#)", BIRN set up an Emergency Media Fund to support independent media outlets, freelance and staff journalists in six Western Balkans countries in order to achieve quality of reporting in times of crises caused by global pandemic. BIRN management team [developed grant guidelines](#), after which the CfA was open for applications for the Equipment Fund, Emergency Content Fund and Investigative Fund. A total of 121 media outlets, staff and freelance journalists applied, however after careful consideration by a BIRN jury set up from editors and managers, a total of 17 media outlets and journalists were awarded.

BIRN additionally gave 49 reporting grants to journalists in the Balkans, Turkey and connected them with journalists from Hungary, Slovenia, Greece, Poland, Moldova, Czech Republic and Croatia to where possible jointly cover some of the burning issues such as the effects of COVID-19 on ordinary people, the environmental pollution, gender inequality, minority and workers' rights as well as problematic connections between media and politics.

As of 2020, the [Balkan Fellowship for Journalistic Excellence](#) was extended to the Visegrad region (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) following the deterioration of the media situation in these countries and the interest of journalists to have access to additional funding and professional development opportunities. On the Fellowship call that was opened in February 2020, more than 80 journalists applied, and the jury consisting of experts and editors from partner media (NZZ, NZC, Standard, Visegrad Square) awarded 10 of them, coming from Albania, Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland and Serbia.

Moreover, BIRN Hub and implementing partners organised 7 award ceremonies for the best investigative stories in 2019, awarded in 2020. In total, 21 Awards for Investigative journalism were awarded to 28 journalists and one media outlet, from six Western Balkans countries: [Albania](#), [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [Kosovo](#), [North Macedonia](#), [Montenegro](#), [Serbia](#), and [Turkey](#). Given that most newsrooms in the Balkans lack the time, resources, or capacity to deal with transitional justice topics, BIRN recognised the need to engage journalists from other media outlets. In 2019, BIRN developed a [grant scheme](#) and provided 10 journalists with 1000 EUR grants to each write one in-depth story on transitional justice and dealing with the past processes in the region. All grantees were previously trained by BIRN on how to report on war crime trials and other transitional justice topics. In 2020, BIRN published 9 out of 10 produced stories, all of which were translated to local languages, and offered for republication to other local and international outlets.

In January 2020, BIRN launched [BIRN Investigative Resource Desk \(BIRD\)](#) which was made by a group of BIRN editors and media experts in order to create a place where journalists, former alumni of BIRN programmes, can get all the latest updates on the state of media and digital freedoms, opportunities within the journalism network, as well as news covering topics linked with the fast evolving world of technology that is affecting all spheres of citizens lives. The platform offers various types of assistance and a set of tools and resources relating, but not limited, to freedom of information, data access and protection, cyber security and open source datasets. Assistance is free and provided on a needs basis. The idea was a result of more than 15 years of BIRN's experience in connecting journalists across the Balkans and beyond to produce complex regional analyses and cross-border investigations, as well as its experience in providing comprehensive training in investigative reporting. So far a total of 12.370 people have used this platform either to download the data or to read the articles. We have uploaded around 3 million (2,994,292) documents in various formats, which is a million more than initially envisaged. This is due to the fact that this activity could easily be conducted despite COVID-19, while the need for transparency was greater due to the curb on freedom of information requests.

## ECR SUCCESS

From the very beginning, response rates have been favourable in general, while in several cases, citizen engagement has been outstanding. Nova ekonomija, an outlet from Serbia, which dealt with increased expenses of online schooling during the pandemic, and Investigative Reporting Lab, IRL, from North Macedonia, which [investigates issues related to urban infrastructure](#) in the capital of Skopje, [managed to reach out to wider audiences](#) and motivate them to engage, resulting in about 1,000 responses each in only few days. At the same time, some very small local media working in smaller communities and dealing with almost exclusively local topics, such as Boka News from Montenegro, which is covering challenges to cultural heritage in the region of Boka Kotorska, has also seen great results, receiving 200 responses and later sparking the response from local institutions as well as national media.

BIRN also used ECR tool to initiate for the first time in the region, cross-border collaboration among local media outlets in producing high-quality journalism. First cross-border story on complications women are experiencing during the labour is currently under development, involving a total of 11 local media outlets from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia. [The story generated responses from almost 600 women in the Balkans.](#)

BIRN has developed Engaged Citizens Reporting tool, enabling media to create different kinds of surveys and questionnaires and embed it to their websites in order to gather inputs, story proposals, evidence and more from the citizens and better answer information needs from their communities. This kind of platform and approach boosting local voices in journalism have not been used in the region before. 51 media outlets from six Western Balkans countries were awarded grants to support them to engage citizens in the reporting process. The topics of the ECR stories include: access to employment, health care systems for minorities and other vulnerable groups, access to healthcare for the general population, pollution, waste management, and other environmental issues; challenges of online schooling, urban development.

During 2020, BIRN also initiated a traineeship programme for young journalists from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, organised from November 2020 until February 2021. A total of 12 participants (two per country) attended initial training on basics of journalism with BIRN's editor Matt Robinson,

before starting their internships at the host media in their countries. Host media include 12 local and national media outlets (online, TV, print) with the proven record of practicing independent journalism. Each trainee had a mentor in the host media, who developed individual traineeship programmes in coordination with the BIRN and provided continuous support and feedback.

Young journalists produced about 300 articles, TV features and other journalistic products during the programme, while at three participants were offered jobs upon the completion of the programme. Programme participants were also provided additional training on gender equality in media reporting, as well as debrief training and training on composition of more complex forms, such as in-depth features.

# VOICES OF UNDERREPORTED GROUPS (INCLUDING MARGINALIZED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS, VICTIMS OF CORRUPTION AND WAR) ARE HEARD ACROSS THE REGION

In 2020 BIRN tried to engage with the communities of vulnerable groups through collaboration with memorial centres in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with artists in Serbia and missing persons associations in the Balkans. BIRN also tried to bring the stories of vulnerable communities to the affected groups – by organizing for the first time public readings of testimonies of war victims and refugees.

In order to engage with the new communities and reach new audiences BIRN started collaborating with Srebrenica Memorial Museum and Memorial Centre in Tuzla. The Srebrenica Memorial Centre and BIRN have begun a project entitled '[The Lives Behind the Fields of Death](#)' which aims to create an oral history by filming 100 interviews with surviving witnesses of the July 1995 genocide of Bosniaks from Srebrenica by Bosnian Serb forces. In May, [BIRN in Bosnia and Herzegovina handed over a documentary film and an archive of articles](#) about the shelling of Tuzla in May 1995 and the trial of the commander who ordered the attack to the new Kapija Memorial Centre in Tuzla.

Besides, BIRN regularly followed the migration and refugee crisis, both on local and regional level, through its focus page [Balkan Migrant Route](#). BIRN stories on the issue were regularly referred by Amnesty International, United Nations, European Stability Initiative and the EU.

Editorially, BIRN also featured a number of stories from LGBTQ groups as they were in particularly affected by the pandemic – especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Turkey. A grantee from Turkey Ozge Sebzeci has set up a podcast using the equipment purchased through an Equipment grant. She has managed to produce seven stories – debates, debunking disinformation, tackling refugee and migrant issues, women's rights, LGBT issues and fake medical treatments for COVID-19.

Through grants for content production, grantees from Montenegro RomaNet have started publishing articles that were focused on issues Roma community has in Montenegro especially during the pandemic. They have published articles on access to education,



healthcare system, employment and discrimination the Roma community faces every day. With this grant the organization from Montenegro has managed to advocate at the Ministry of Health exemption for Roma families not to pay for urgent procedures such as childbirth.

On a regional level and in Albania, BIRN has also added a gender angle on the editorial output of its publications [BalkanInsight.com](#) and [Reporter.al](#), revealing that a smaller number women judges have been fired for corruption in comparison to man from the vetting process, or analysing the impact of council women in democratic debate on local government. Gender based violence during the lockdown period has been also an important focus of BIRN in its coverage of the pandemic and increased difficulties that women were facing during the health emergency, such as [Roma and Egyptian women](#); [single mothers](#); [increased cases of domestic violence](#); as well as [protests of activists and citizens against sexual violence](#).

Meanwhile, nine televised programs specifically tackled property issues concerning Kosovo's ethnic non-majority communities, as well as women's property rights, wartime sexual violence, returned foreign fighters and war crimes. BIRN Kosovo also produced seven (7) public service announcements targeting women, informing them of the benefits of registering property, either individually or jointly with their spouses. Historically, due to the patriarchal system of society, women in Kosovo were deprived of owning property. The legislation changed, but the implementation remains poor. [Although women and men have equal rights to property under the Kosovo law, women only make up 15 percent of property owners](#).

Teamed up with the Irish Investigative Hub, [BIRN also published an investigation](#) about hard working conditions Balkan migrant workers face in Ireland, including long hours, low pay and difficult relations with supervisors. In August, BIRN published a story revealing how Austrian [company used inmates](#) below market price and against the law in Serbia.

Besides above mentioned European Press Prize and Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Award that BIRN as an organisation won, a number of BIRN journalists received prizes for tackling issues related to vulnerable groups, including Serbeze Haxhiaj for her investigation [“Kosovo’s Invisible Children: The Secret Legacy of Wartime Rape.”](#) This story for the first time revealed facts of concrete cases of children born from rape during the independence war in Kosovo. Behar Mustafa was awarded by the Coalition of NGOs for Child Protection in Kosovo [for his story about smuggling of children to Italy](#). In December, Emina Dizdarevic won [the Srdjan Aleksic award for her continuous reporting on](#) marginalised groups in Bosnian society, while her Bosnian colleague Azra Husic won UNICEF award for reporting on children with special needs during the pandemic.

**PEOPLE HAVE  
INCREASED  
INFLUENCE  
ON DEMOCRATIC  
PROCESSES**

# WORK OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS MORE TRANSPARENT AND RESPONSIVE

In 2020, BIRN made public institutions more transparent and responsive through: Investigative journalism that triggered investigations, improvements in state systems, inquires and parliamentary questions; Publishing data of public interests through databases; Requesting documents from Freedom of Information Law; and Inspiring civil society groups to have call to actions.

The coronavirus pandemic has had a chilling effect on people's right to information in Central and Southeast Europe, with many countries adopting legal measures which temporarily altered or even suspended obligations regarding the public's right to information. Thankfully, many of these measures have since lapsed with the end of the states of emergency and lockdowns, though there are other pieces of legislation in the works that could hinder people's right to information.

On the annual International Day for Universal Access to Information, BIRN has released data showing dramatic drops in responses to freedom of information (FOI) requests by official bodies, either in time or in their entirety. BIRN keeps track of its FOI requests and produces reports of the topic, because the information gleaned from these requests enables it to produce investigative pieces and expose wrongdoing by governments, companies and powerful individuals.

In many cases, countries used pandemic as an excuse not to provide information, citing that state focused on health crisis and lacked resources for the requests for transparency. [Many international organisations criticised this approach as an assault on transparency and freedoms, enshrined in constitutions and international conventions.](#)

The 2020 data shows that BIRN journalists have sent at least 366 FOI requests to various public institutions in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Turkey. So far, just 123 requests, or 33.6 per cent, have been answered, either fully or partially, while the remainder are either rejected or still not answered.

The law in all the covered countries has an established and independent mechanism to ensure implementation of the law – the Commissioner's Office. However, the powers granted these offices are not strong in most of the countries, so no institution can actually be fined for not

complying with FOI laws. Even in the few countries that impose fines, institutions are not required or strongly encouraged to respect the law. Even when institutions were found guilty of wrongly denying access to information, in only a few occasions the fines have been paid. For several years in a row, the countries concerned have lacked the political will to fully implement Freedom of Information laws.

Public institutions that so far have been most likely to answer FOI requests are the Trade Ministry and prosecutors' offices (Serbia), the Judicial Council (North Macedonia), the Kosovo Judicial Council and local municipalities (Kosovo).

BIRN also tests the transparency of public institutions by analysing their compliance with the Open Government Partnership (OGP), an initiative that aims to secure concrete commitments from national and subnational governments to promote open government, empower citizens, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to strengthen governance. So far, four Balkan states have joined the OGP: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia, while Kosovo is still not part of the OGP.

Some of the commitments each state proposed in their Action Plans are related to: open data, anti-corruption, public procurement, developing e-governance, adopting laws to support transparency of public institutions etc. But despite their promise to be more transparent and open, these countries are still struggling to meet the commitments.

All five countries have failed in becoming more transparent and digitally accessible. Publishing the latest updates on their websites, such as financial reports, ministry meetings minutes, or other current and important public documents, seems like too long a process to be ever fully implemented.

In the reporting period, BIRN also continued to collect and publicly present documentation of public importance received from various public institutions focusing on transitional justice. BIRN updated its [War Crimes Verdicts Map](#) with 39 new verdicts, and it now contains 507 war crime cases. For each case, users can find indictments, first instance verdicts, final verdicts, as well as reports produced by various regional organisations that followed war crime trials during the past two decades (Documenta, Humanitarian Law Centre, Humanitarian Law Centre Kosovo, OSCE). BIRN will continue to update the map with new judgements as they are being rendered.

Using a similar approach BIRN team during 2020 worked on a mass grave database which will be presented in the first quarter of 2021. Database showcases 42 largest mass graves in former Yugoslavia, and includes all publicly available data and reports so far published or produced by local and international courts, international and in country commissions for missing persons and non-governmental institutions.

In 2020, through war crime trials monitoring BIRN revealed that a Serbian war crime convict escaped his prison sentence for crimes committed during war in Kosovo. BIRN requested information from the Serbian ministry of interior which initially claimed that the story is not in public interest, but following BIRN's continuous appeals, the ministry provided information. This [report](#) triggered responses from civil society organisations, including Youth Initiative for Human Rights and [Human Rights Watch](#). BIRN reports also highlighted the [need for transparency of institutions dealing with war crimes](#) and were backed by Serbian Ombudsman.

In order to ensure more transparency in the work of the Bosnian public institutions BIRN in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been publishing every [single procurement](#) for medical equipment and supplies, mapping the spending of more than 20 million euros. BIRN BiH continued to work on its [database](#) of vehicles of official institutions and public companies in BiH, updating it with over 8,000 inputs for 1,800 tenders. Additionally, BIRN BiH journalists alongside with colleagues from other newsrooms (30 journalists in total) started a campaign requesting State Prosecution indictments for corruption to be publicly available.

In Serbia, BIRN in partnership with Civic Initiatives launched the new project which aims to create conditions for transparent and efficient distribution of public funds through open calls. This is a pioneer initiative since we are collecting a set of data on all open calls run by state ministries, Autonomous Province of Vojvodina and 169 local self-governments to present them in open data format. This program effectively scales up our previous programs, utilizing resources and previously gained knowledge, additionally increasing advocacy towards open data concepts and easier access to relevant information. At least 15 local CSO representatives will be engaged in the research and monitoring part of the project, while more will be invited to take part in an informal coalition to advocate improvements in open call state aid mechanisms.

Throughout this reporting period, citizens were more active, demanding transparency and accountability on key policy processes at both the local and central level. Between January 2020 and December 2020, our anti-corruption platform, [KALLXO.com](#), received 1,634 reports from citizens that BIRN journalists have followed up through journalism. The reports received were focused on health issues, elections, local governance and resulted in 79 cases of direct impacts, including suspensions of public officials, indictments raised or reported individuals being arrested and/or fined. The overall number of complaints from citizens is lower than in 2019 when most of the complaints were focused on elections in Kosovo.

BIRN Kosovo also monitored fifteen recruitment processes for senior positions at a number of Kosovo's institutions and public enterprises. On December 30, 2020 BIRN Kosovo published its ["Recruitment Monitoring Report – Parties of Employment"](#), which presented information

obtained from this direct monitoring of recruitment processes over a one-year period, from December 2019 to December 2020.

In this report, BIRN Kosovo also noted the change of three governments within the year 2020 and dismissal of boards of publicly owned enterprises by each government that came to power. Also, the report provides details of the last Government vacancies for boards of several publicly owned enterprises. These processes are still ongoing, and it is expected that interviews of candidates who met the minimum criteria will start soon.

Following BIRN's recommendation, for the first time ever the Office of the Prime Minister of Kosovo required the evaluation committees to check into the political background of each candidate, requesting data from the Central Election Commission and the State Treasury. After receiving this information, 20 candidates were removed from the race for boards of publicly owned enterprises.

BIRN Kosovo has been active in contributing to legislative changes by participating in working groups, panels, conferences, workshops and group meetings, in order to provide feedback and recommendations on legislative processes. Our legal office also gained and provided expertise by participating in more than 25 public discussions, workshops, conferences, and meetings.

Throughout 2020, BIRN Kosovo monitored 463 court hearings and sent a total of 724 complaints to responsible institutions, out of which 389 were requests for access to legal documents.

Through our investigative journalism, BIRN revealed controversial contracts governments had. In particular, BIRN in Kosovo published government deals with consultancy companies that advocated for redrawing borders with Serbia.

As a result, European Parliament rapporteur for Kosovo and [Greens/European Free Alliance](#) shadow rapporteur Viola von Kramon called on the government [of Kosovo to increase transparency/ accountability](#). She also acted upon our investigation in Serbian, demanding [from Serbia to publish correct COVID-19](#) data.

Joint BIRN and Der Spiegel [investigation about a US consultancy giant McKinsey](#) and its controversial deals with the European Commission showed how the deal raised concerns over the outsourcing of public policy on refugees. As a result, European Parliament called the European Commission to reveal the deal it had with McKinsey company in dealing with the asylum policy through [the parliamentary questions](#).

# PEOPLE HAVE INCREASED OPPORTUNITIES TO INFLUENCE POLICIES AND LEGISLATION

Despite the pandemic and moving all conferences and workshops to online mode, in 2020, BIRN had 324 people attending its discussions and taking part in debates.

Through the innovative use of technology, BIRN also enabled citizens to influence media content and engage more with journalists and editors in the media across the region.

As part of the regional 'Media for All' project, BIRN held a series of virtual public debates to discuss online media regulation and self-regulation in the Western Balkans. The issue of online regulation and self-regulation showed to be one of the key concerns of the media community in BIRN's needs assessment of local media in the Balkans. Three public debates gathered representatives of regulatory and self-regulatory bodies', academia, legal and media experts, who debated different aspects of online media regulation and self-regulation in the Western Balkans.

Through the course of debates, participants discussed the way the government and the civil society sector are responding to new threats to professional journalism in cyberspace and the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on media freedom in the region. Speakers agreed that online media in the region requires stronger self-regulation rather than government bodies controlling their work. Different stakeholders in those discussions concluded that the governments should not have mechanisms to interfere in the media content and that authorities should also strengthen the rule of law in terms of copyright, as well as prevention of hate speech and ethical violations.

In addition, BIRN hosted two closed meetings with representatives of states, diplomats, members of the civil society, independent institutions focusing [on justice and accountability](#) in light of the new indictments by Kosovo Specialist Prosecution and [the other about human rights and COVID-19](#).

In January 2020, BIRN launched [Digital Rights Monitoring Database](#) [3] as a part of BIRN's wider efforts to protect and promote human rights and non-violent communication both offline and online. The database is easily accessible to the public and searchable by different criteria (date, country, affected party, means of the attack, description, attacker, etc.) and it lists cases in six local languages and English. In its pilot year, BIRN database included countries with increased violence in digital space like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and

North Macedonia, while in 2021 BIRN they are extended to Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro. The data from the database is being updated on a regular basis and can be extracted at all times. It aims to determine patterns of online violence against citizens through crowdsourcing violations on social media and websites, categorising the violations and informing citizens and relevant institutions about trends and key issues. Additionally, when COVID-19 pandemic started, BIRN's monitoring has noticed a significant rise in the number of cases of online violations and the increase of the arrest of citizens for their posts on social media. In order to enhance the response on these emerging negative trends, BIRN launched [a special page focusing on the state of digital rights in during the pandemic](#) where both public and relevant stakeholders can get familiar with the monitoring's findings.

By now, BIRN documented [649 cases of online violations](#) out of which [221 were directly linked with the COVID-19 pandemic](#), exposing the most troubling trends such as: disinformation campaigns, online frauds, publication of unverified information, publishing of citizens' personal data, increased arrests for social media posts and threats. [The overview](#) and the [final report](#) exposed the harmful patterns in eight states and provided a set of recommendations for public, independent and private actors who have the power to influence the health of our digital sphere.

Following the situation caused by COVID-19 pandemic, BIRN in Bosnia and Herzegovina started the [#BIRNdetektor](#) (BIRN detecting) public campaign on social media, calling people to report to us any abuse or regularities detected in their local communities during the state of emergency.

In the first two months after the start of the outbreak, March and April 2020, we received 7 emails of citizens, and more than 40 tips on social media accounts. Most of these on Facebook and Twitter, which our journalists further investigated. The results were 12 published stories on local [www.Detektor.ba](http://www.Detektor.ba) website. The main focus and what citizens mostly reported was related to lack of medical supplies and struggle to make appointments with doctors, problems related to inconsistent information from the government about isolation, coronavirus tests and other measures, as well as about people being fired disregarding the contracts and without adequate compensation.

<sup>[3]</sup> Database has been listed as a resource by [Global Fund for Media Development](#), [The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance -International IDEA](#), [EDRI - the biggest European network defending rights and freedoms online](#), [Vrije University Brussels](#), [European Data Journalism Network](#), while the findings have been referenced in media articles in Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania and others.



Additionally, BIRN BiH opened a new topic on its website [Koronavirus](#), where journalists report on all issues on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected work of public institutions as well as life of ordinary citizens, publishing 159 articles. Also, in September 2020 BIRN in Bosnia and Herzegovina launched a call inviting its readers to [report cases of corruption](#) they have spotted or witnessed.

During its monitoring of the Tax Administration of Kosovo, BIRN Kosovo received more than 300 reports from citizens regarding irregularities related to the COVID-19 outbreak. Based on these reports, more than 50 legal letters were sent to the Tax Administration of Kosovo (TAK), leading to more than 150 businesses being inspected by officials and over 200,000 euros in fines being imposed.

During the reporting period BIRN Kosovo published a total of 35,372 articles, including 129 articles on KALLXO.com's "Krypometer" fact-checking section, 782 in-depth investigative articles in online newspaper "Life in Kosovo", and around 600 articles on English language newspaper Prishtina Insight. Many of these stories and their subsequent impacts were a result of citizens' reporting through BIRN's KALLXO.com platform, which during 2020 received a total of 1,634 citizen reports.

As part of the BIRN Serbia project *Active citizens – better community*, implemented in partnership with Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence and Belgrade Open School, was to improve citizens' engagement in CSOs advocacy activities. In the second project year, there was progress in improving citizens' engagement in CSOs advocacy activities. In total, participating CSOs involved more than 341 000 citizens via social media activities, public events and research related activities.

In 2020, BIRN Serbia also launched a programme on digital media policies. This initiative emerged from a large gap between the overwhelming presence of digital platforms tailoring content production and distribution and significant lack of domestic media to invest resources, increase knowledge and skills to navigate the complexity of digital space to ensure its proper space in the new information ecosystem. By the end of 2020, BIRN Serbia produced a three-part baseline report, mapping existing issues and possible interventions. BIRN Serbia presented a case study in relation to the artificial intelligence content moderation on social media platforms, bringing about issues of undue content censorships. The case was presented at 2020 online Internet Governance Forum and is additionally part of DC Media Sustainability annual report. This initiative is considered a baseline and its purpose was to set the ground for the larger digital governance programme in Serbia, which will include different stakeholders. Topics include issues of privacy, protection, digital literacy, online harassment, etc. which can benefit exercise of rights in digital space. Citizens will have the opportunity to influence regulatory framework through representatives of CSOs that are part of the programme. Advocacy efforts were further enhanced through cooperation with the media department of

OSCE Mission in Serbia and Ministry of Culture and Information, which, together with BIEN and NUNS, co-sponsored a first national online debate on various aspects and issues affecting media freedoms in digital space, including AI development, security, protection of privacy etc. The debate was organised in December 2020, with more than 70 participants online. The debate was set to be the first in a series of events, planned to take place in 2021. BIRN efforts to influence overall media policy development continued through participation in development of the Action Plan to accompany Media Strategy in Serbia. After several months of engagement and more than 35 meetings of the working group, AP was finally adopted in December 2020, by the Serbian Government. This AP now opens the solid ground for independent, CSO monitoring of the Media Strategy implementation. BIRN representative will continue this engagement as part of the working group tasked to monitor implementation of strategic documents.

An important part of BIRN Albania's work over the past year has been the lobbying against government efforts to regulate online media outlets through an administrative body, which we believe would restrict media freedom and increase self-censorship. In [June 2020<sup>th</sup>](#), [VeniceCommission](#) gave a negative opinion of the amendments to the Audiovisual Media Law and the EU Council imposed as condition for the first intergovernmental conference as part of the EU accession talks that Albania media regulation should be in line with Venice Commission opinion. BIRN Albania advocated publicly against the amendments and the acceptance by the government of Venice Commission opinion with media appearances and lobbied on the issue [international media organizations](#), Embassy of EU states in Albania, the European Commission and [European parliament](#). Finally, after a two-year battle in December 2020 the government announced that it was giving in its effort to change the media law.

# CSOs STRENGTHENED TO EFFECTIVELY ADDRESS PUBLIC INTEREST

In 2020, BIRN had a close collaboration with CSOs from the region through several approaches: To increase impact of its stories and activities, BIRN partnered with organisations working in similar thematic areas; To increase impact of the CSOs' work BIRN provided them with skills and knowledge in engaging audiences and reach; Created networks of civil society groups working in the same areas, but with different approach to create synergies for more effective change; and As a result of the collaboration between civil society and journalists, BIRN has published hard hitting investigative stories, features and analysis on issues of public interests as well as news, features and analysis covering marginalized groups, activists and grassroots organisations in their fight for social justice.

In overall, 577 CSO members were trained through BIRN activities in the last year, increasing the numbers set in the result framework.

BIRN transitional justice team continued to collaborate with key stakeholders and civil society groups working in the area, both on local and international level. Together with the Dutch based CSO Impunity Watch BIRN worked on developing policy recommendations in the area of conflict prevention. During research, BIRN and Impunity Watch team met with dozens of civil society organisations working in this field in order to articulate comprehensive recommendations for governments, civil society, independent actors and others. Workshop with civil society groups and presentation of the report is planned for 2021.

In the reporting period BIRN also [awarded 20 journalists, artists, historians, and activists](#) with 2,000 EUR grants to develop 18 small projects based on the archive of the ICTY and national courts that dealt with war crimes cases. All projects aimed to promote and disseminate the archives of the international and local courts, thus increasing intercultural dialogue and prospects for reconciliation. They differed in both form and content, addressing different aspects of transitional justice. BIRN provided grantees guidance and mentorship throughout the process, thus improving and enhancing their skills to conduct such complex projects. During 2020, 10 small projects were developed and published, and their topics ranged from economic crimes, human trafficking, genocide denial, work of prosecution, educational tools for students, documentaries etc. Remaining 8 projects will be produced during 2021.

In order to continue to build a healthier online environment, in August 2020, BIRN initiated the establishment of the [SEE Digital Rights Network \(Declaration\)](#). The Network serves as a platform for knowledge transfer and boosting of skills. Through the SEE Digital Rights Network, BIRN teamed up with organisations dealing with digital rights, human rights, social care and media. This is the first network of its kind in the region that aims to advance the protection of digital rights and address the growing challenges posed by the widespread use of advanced technologies.

Collaboration between journalists, tech and legal experts in BIRN and [SHARE Foundation](#) led to numerous results ([investigations](#), [analysis](#), [policy research](#), [regional overview](#), [regional report](#), [articles](#), [monitoring cases](#)) but most importantly it enhanced the role of civil society and media in providing accurate reporting in the public interest during the pandemic. [The stories published](#) – that would otherwise remain hidden – exposed manipulations with the health data, nepotism and violations of governments and private companies that used the pandemic to breach privacy.

The quality of our work has brought us participation in interesting new initiatives this year and collaboration with women rights organisations to boost their digital rights knowledge. Noticing a serious rise of gender-based attacks in the digital arena, BIRN partnered with Belgrade based [Atina NGO](#) aiming to contribute to the safer digital environment for the girls and women in the region of the Balkans. Through the specialised reporting, training of journalists, campaigning and continuous monitoring of online abuses and violations against girls and women, BIRN will shed light on existing trends and harmful online practices directed towards women and girls. BIRN strives to create space for female voices to be heard and respected while at the same time educating journalists in the region on how to sensitively conduct coverage on these topics.

In the reporting period, international research organisation IDEA initiated cooperation with BIRN to introduce its work as a resource for its [Global Monitor of COVID-19's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights](#). A memorandum of understanding was signed in June 2020.

Notes from Poland initiated a network of independent media outlets that report on the SEE region in English, with the aim of increasing global understanding of important events taking place in a region. BIRN has joined the initiative as it will help us to position in the region and build lasting contacts with other media of similar editorial orientation.

Media from the network are regularly republishing BIRN content, and the meeting was held in November 2020 to consider the plans for the joint conference that should take place in 2021. BIRN was also invited, second year in a row, onto the organisational board of the [Prague](#)

[Media point conference](#), flagship media conference in the Visegrad Region that took place from December 1 – 10, 2020.

On a country level, BIRN in North Macedonia closely collaborated with different CSOs such as the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, the Institute for Human Rights, the Coalition All for fair trials and the Centre for Civic Communications, as well as numerous others that do monitoring work of state of judiciary, advocate for transparency and fight against corruption.

In Serbia, BIRN organised a training for 19 civil society groups to expand their knowledge and skills related to advocacy. Capacities of participating CSOs for design of advocacy strategies have improved through training and mentoring and expert support. A 75% percent of locally-led advocacy initiatives achieved intended results indicating that, despite unfavourable context, CSOs made notable progress in their activities. As part of the project *Active citizens – better community* BIRN participated in the [production and broadcast of online conference](#) and award ceremony for the best advocacy action, followed online by more than 600 people, in Serbian and English.

In Albania, during this period, there was a lack of will on the part of political parties to involve civil society in consultations, many times justified by the emergency situation and restrictions posed by social distancing. For this reason, BIRN Albania has dedicated coverage on a number of initiatives / reactions of civil society against legal initiatives, such as changing the [law of the state police](#), [Anti-KCK initiative](#), draft [media laws](#), [Constitutional changes](#) related to the electoral reform, changes of [Criminal Code](#), etc., by making their voices heard and helping CSOs to advocate more effectively their issues through the media. During the same period, in cooperation with five other civil society organisations, BIRN Albania has contributed to a shadow report on human rights focusing on media freedom in the country while Albania held the chairmanship of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

# RISKS AND LESSONS LEARNED

In particular, BIRN identified several worrying trends - Autocratic contagion in the exercise of power; Assaults on transparency and media freedom; Disregard for the rule of law; Growing challenges for civil society; Ideological entrenchment and polarisation; Profound demographic and social change; and Heightened geopolitical tensions and a fractious Europe.

The pandemic further advanced nationalism, Euroscepticism and far-right extremism — all whipped up by a torrent of disinformation. To many people, authoritarian alternatives looked increasingly attractive. Yet there were also reasons for cautious optimism. The 2020 was a time of mass protest as people from the Baltic to the Adriatic voiced anger with governments seen as overbearing, corrupt or contemptuous of the rule of law.

Many countries, primarily Serbia and Albania have no effective opposition at all — and thus no real checks on government abuses of power — following unprecedented decisions by opposition lawmakers to resign *en masse* and renounce their parliamentary mandates.

Democracies in the region need free media, parliamentary oversight, judicial independence and respect for the rule of law — the very things easily undermined during a crisis.

BIRN Network aimed to contribute to the above mentioned list primarily through what journalists know to do best: probe, scrutinize and hold powerful to account.

Having in mind that investigative journalists are often not the mainstream in some Balkan countries, BIRN build coalitions in order to strengthen its voice - we collaborated with local, national, regional and international media; we build alliances with renown civil society organisation that advocated for a change following the BIRN findings; we inspired international watchdog organisations to actions; we provoked reactions from EU parliamentarians to hold governments in the Balkans accountable and we provided inputs for the numerous reports by the OSCE, UN and EU.

In order to overcome the challenge of poor media situation in the Balkans and recognising the need for improving financial and editorial standards of small local outlets, BIRN shared knowledge and provided mentorship to local journalists to strengthen their reporting.

One of the biggest challenges was to secure engagement with communities despite the lack of offline activities and online fatigue caused by the pandemic. This inspired BIRN to use technology to create new tools for engagement of citizens and online platform for journalists

Moving all activities to online completely, also posed a challenge for BIRN staff, that due to the increased disinformation on one side and need for the quality and reliable information on the other side, worked more in 2020 than any other year before.

In some cases, especially when it comes to lawsuits and cyber-attacks on the Network and its journalists, BIRN realised it needs to rely on external expertise as it currently does not have capacities to respond to these threats from its own resources. In these circumstances, BIRN relied on large media associations such as Global Fund for Media Development, Committee to Protect Journalists, media lawyers and IT companies.