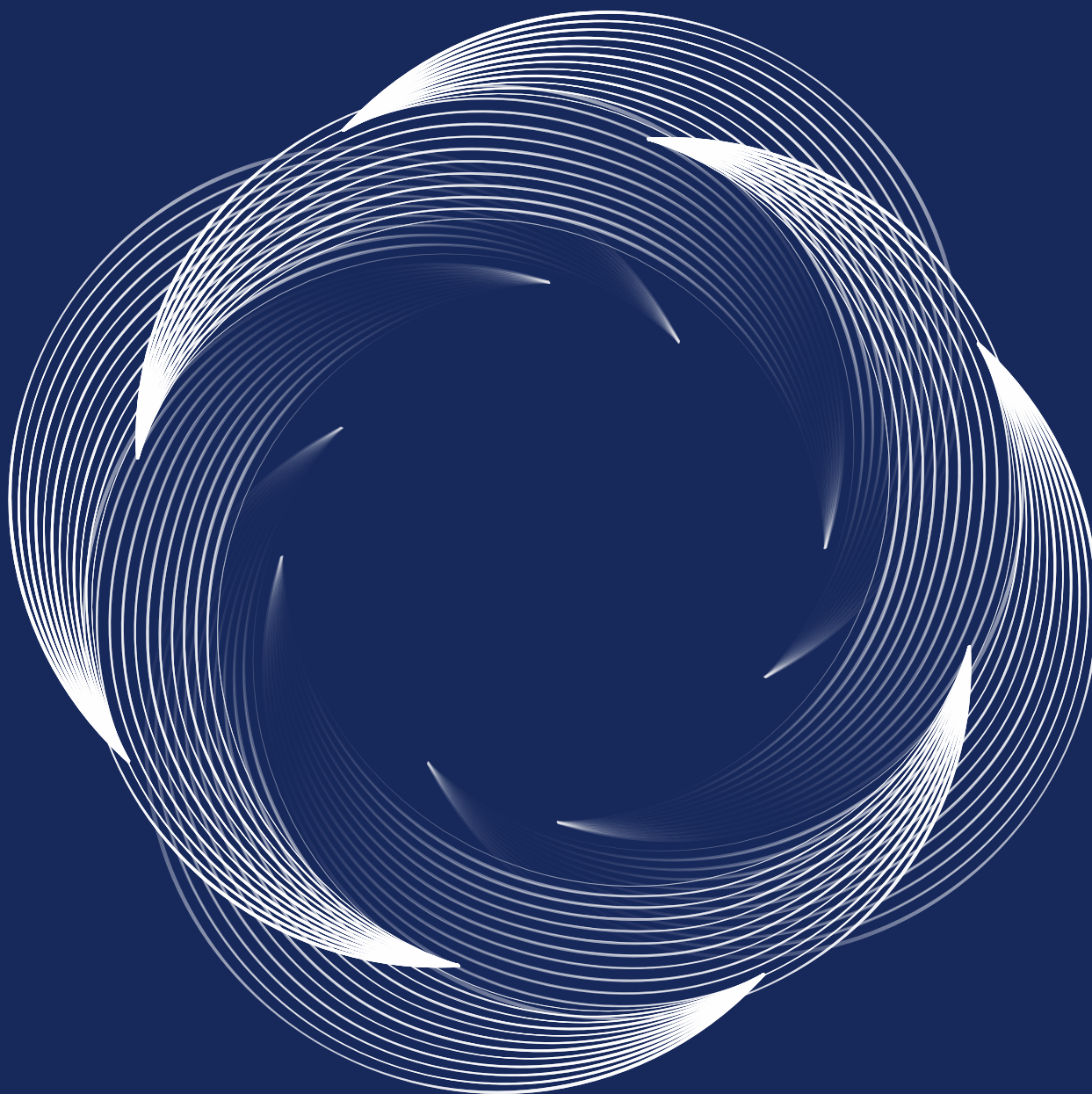


ONLINE INTIMIDATION: CONTROLLING THE NARRATIVE IN THE BALKANS

Annual Digital Rights Report 2021



The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) is a network of non-governmental organisations promoting freedom of speech, human rights and democratic values in Southern and Eastern Europe.

This report covers the period from 1 August 2020 to 31 August 2021 and includes cases of digital rights violations monitored by BIRN in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo and by the SHARE Foundation in Serbia.

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FOREWORD

We stayed at home for most of this and last year and, despite the fast development of vaccines, we are still living with the Covid-19 pandemic. This also meant we spent a lot of screen hours on our smart phones. As a result, most social media platforms saw a rise in the number of users and overall engagement, with the biggest jump seen on TikTok. The video-sharing app engaged more than 100 million users globally during the pandemic and has become increasingly popular in south-eastern Europe. TikTok was not only used to find banana cake recipes or make-up tutorials but also to spread hate, threats, anti-LGBT messages and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories. Some LGBT+ activists reported cases to both the relevant authorities and TikTok but in most cases no one was held accountable for abuses.

From August 2020 until August this summer, we recorded almost 800 cases of digital rights violations in eight countries of south-eastern Europe: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania and Serbia. Violations took place not just on TikTok, but also on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and were also spread via Viber and WhatsApp.

Our report shows that vulnerable groups, including women, minority groups, LGBT +, Roma and Jewish communities, minors and migrants, are particularly exposed to online attacks. Similarly, political and religious tensions, which still continue to mark the cultural and political life of our societies, also surged, further polarising society. All of this suggests that what happens in the virtual space is not much different from the “physical world”. Ongoing tensions and cultural controversies are simply migrating from one place to another and prevention or protection mechanisms are far from successful.

It comes as no surprise that the two most common violations this year were “pressure because of expression and activities on the internet” and “manipulation and propaganda in the digital environment”. Journalists were most frequently the target of online threats in two countries – Serbia and Hungary. In both countries, pro-government social media accounts were involved in smear campaigns against independent journalists.

Anti-vaccine movements were particularly strong in Croatia and Romania. Ethnic division and denial of crimes were most common in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

And these are just some of the trends we identified. We hope our detailed account of digital

rights violations in the next 50 pages will help many to understand the scale, nature and causes of online abuse and intimidation and also inspire the authorities, policy makers and private companies to take action and create safer environments on the internet.

Finally, the public and civil society organisations should not consider themselves powerless or confined to the role of minor players in this enterprise. On the contrary, they are at the centre of the stage. Through the force of open internet, they can raise their voices, draw attention to sensitive issues, influence national and international policy decision and, ultimately, drive societal change.

Marija Ristic

Regional Director

Balkan Investigative Reporting Network

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

During our monitoring period, which runs from 1 August 2020 to 31 August 2021, the total number of cases registered in our database stood at 799 and were collected from eight countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina (101), Croatia (175), Hungary (150), Kosovo (79), Montenegro (45), North Macedonia (66), Serbia (111) and Romania (72).

We filed cases by month and July 2021 turned out to be the month in which the highest number of cases were recorded (74), followed by February 2021 (72), January 2021 (71), June 2021 (64), April 2021 (63), August 2021 (63), May 2021 (62), March 2021 (61), November 2020 (59), October 2020 (56), August 2020 (55), December 2020 (51) and September 2020 (48).

As verified cases could sometimes be counted as more than one type of rights infraction, the overall number of violations (1,030) is actually greater than the number of verified cases. "Pressure because of expression and activities on the internet" is the category with the highest number of recorded violations (449), followed by "manipulation and propaganda in the digital environment" (309), "information security breaches" (138) and "information privacy and personal data breaches" (109). The categories of "other violations" (13) and "blocking and filtering of content" (12) logged the fewest violations.

Fake news, conspiracy theories and misinformation on the web continue to blight the digital space. Anti-maskers and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories have progressively become the new normal of Covid-deniers and opponents of virus control measures. Similarly, cases of "hate speech and discrimination" (156), "threatening content and endangering of security" (92), and "publishing falsehoods and unverified information with the intention to damage reputation" (85), thrive online. Women, LGBT+ and Roma communities, national, racial, and other ethnic minorities suffer online attacks most frequently.

Political opponents, independent media and freelance journalists have also been routinely targeted. Members of the public were abused most often (535), followed by public figures (104), journalists (71), state institution (66), state officials (60) and political parties (57). In Hungary, where pro-government media are waging war on political opponents, political parties were targeted in 27 out of 150 cases. In Serbia and Croatia, where independent journalism is routinely undermined, journalists were attacked in 30 and 14 cases respectively.

In the cases we verified, members of the public were both the party to suffer most attacks

(535) and to attack others (314), demonstrating that despite its flaws the online realm remains a fairly free environment to express opinions and share criticism.

At the same time, many attacks were carried out by online media (189) and this has become a widespread trend in Hungary (62), Kosovo (49), Bosnia (27) and Croatia (24). Unknown perpetrators (146) were found, unsurprisingly, to be most likely to carry out online fraud, technical and DDoS attacks.

Finally, activists and civil society organisations, targeted in 15 and 16 cases respectively, have not been seen to be actively involved in a significant number of violations as perpetrators (4 and 6 cases).

Definitions, numbers and methodology

For the purposes of this report, we perceive digital rights as fundamentally the same human rights that exist in the offline world and we believe that they should be protected in the same manner.

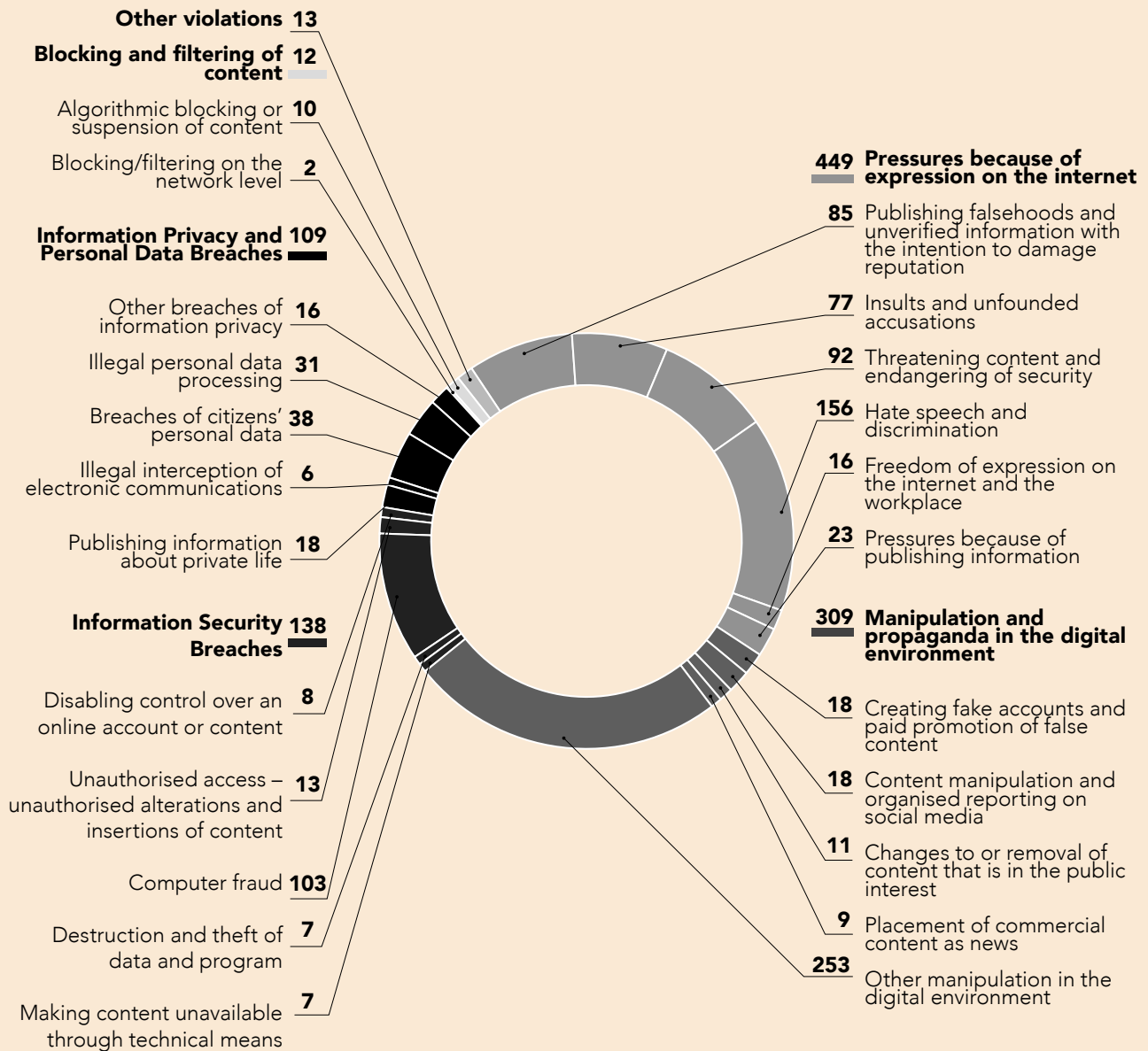
To better understand how digital rights are being undermined, we have created seven, broad [categories of violations](#):

- Information security breaches
- Information privacy and personal data breaches
- Pressures because of expression and activities on the internet
- Manipulation and propaganda in the digital environment
- Holding intermediaries liable
- Blocking and filtering of content
- Other breaches

As our lives are increasingly dependent on the internet and we increasingly exercise our freedoms online, it is vital digital rights are afforded the same protections as offline human rights. Of course, we acknowledge that digital right definitions will need to be redefined to keep pace with rapidly-evolving cyberspace development and world events.

The numbers

As evidenced by the graph below, there is an almost dizzying array of ways in which digital rights were violated during the monitoring period (1 August 2020 and 31 August 2021). We have sorted the data into seven categories and 25 sub-categories.



The 799 cases tracked by BIRN in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Romania and by the SHARE Foundation in Serbia cover government websites, media outlets and social media accounts owned by prominent public figures, celebrities and members of the public. These examples are a mere fraction of the true number of violations that occurred during the time period covered by the report.

Total Number

Total number of cases verified by BIRN between 1 August 2020 and 31 August 2021: 799

Number of verified cases by country:

Croatia 175, Hungary 150, Serbia 111, Bosnia 101, Kosovo 79, Romania 72, North Macedonia 66, Montenegro 45

Country-Month	Aug 20	Sep 20	Oct 20	Nov 20	Dec 20	Jan 21	Feb 21	Mar 21	Apr 21	May 21	Jun 21	Jul 21	Aug 21
Croatia	9	9	16	14	16	15	17	19	12	15	11	14	8
Hungary	13	18	7	13	6	14	7	10	13	12	12	16	9
Serbia	13	2	9	13	8	11	7	8	9	5	9	9	8
Bosnia	3	4	2	4	4	7	8	7	13	10	13	15	11
North Macedonia	5	6	9	5	6	5	4	4	3	4	4	5	6
Romania	7	6	7	6	4	6	9	6	1	4	3	5	8
Montenegro	3	2	3	3	3	4	6	2	5	2	5	3	4
Kosovo	2	1	3	1	4	9	14	5	7	10	7	7	9
total	55	48	56	59	51	71	72	61	63	62	64	74	63

Methodology

BIRN and the SHARE Foundation have verified and analysed 799 cases we identified as violations of digital rights. These cases were either reported directly to BIRN by journalists, bloggers or members of the public or were picked up by monitoring – individual researchers – at both BIRN and the SHARE Foundation.

Through our [unique monitoring methodology](#), we have defined violations of those rights into seven broad categories as listed earlier in the report. Of course, developing a methodology to classify and monitor digital rights and breaches of freedoms is a continuous process, bearing in mind the expansion of technologies and tools in the online sphere.

Featured cases: Common trends

Discrimination and hate speech thrive online

With 156 violations out of 799 total cases, hate speech and discrimination incidents occupy a prominent place in the digital space of the eight countries monitored.

The LGBT+ community remains one of the groups most at risk of online almost everywhere. Some public events like the [Zagreb](#) and [Sarajevo](#) Pride marches, Croatia's June 2021 annual [Pride Ride](#) or the [ruling](#) of the Croatian Constitutional Court allowing same-sex couples to foster children triggered episodes of online discrimination and abuse.

National and ethnic minorities have also often fallen victim to discrimination in the digital space. The Bulgarian minority of North Macedonia suffer many online hate speech episodes due to persistent tensions between the two countries. In this context, the [attack](#) on the North Macedonian Eurovision contestant Vasil Garvalniev because of his dual Bulgarian-North Macedonian citizenship was depressingly predictable.

In Bosnia, ethnic tensions are endemic to the social fabric and political system. [Albanian](#) and Croatian minorities in Montenegro also suffer from episodes of ethnic-based hatred. Similarly, the Jewish minority in Romania still struggles to be fully integrated into the socio-cultural context of the country. Episodes of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial - such as those directed at [Maia Morgenstern](#), the head of the Jewish State Theatre in Bucharest, and [Silviu Vexler](#), an MP from the Federation of the Jewish Communities in Romania – show Romania has much work to do on tackling anti-Semitic attacks.

Political and religious rivals are heavily affected too. In Kosovo, former President Hashim Thaci and current President Osmani have been repeatedly attacked by political rivals. Pro-government media outlets are [waging war against opponents of the ruling Fidesz party](#) on a daily basis in Hungary. Cases of hate speech against the [Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro](#) are also a daily occurrence.

Homophobia and transphobia persist

Religion, nationalism and far-right politics continue to fuel a significant number of cases of homophobia and transphobia in the region. In Bosnia, influential religious authorities such as former Salafi imam [Sanin Musa](#) and the [imam of the Ferhadija mosque](#) in Sarajevo have contributed in the spread of fear and prejudice based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

In Croatia, following the annual Pride Ride, Facebook users [commented](#) on the event comparing participants to paedophiles and a well-known [TikTok user](#) defined homosexuality as a disease in a video that went viral. Pro-government media outlets in Hungary are backing up the Fidesz party's anti-LGBT+ rhetoric in an attempt to reaffirm the value of the traditional Christian family. "If a man and a woman live together, get married and children are born—we call this a family. This is not a question of human rights, we are just calling things by their true name," Orban repeated in an [interview](#) for Magyar Nemzet.

Transphobia permeates many online environments. Following the nominee of Rachel Levine as US President Joe Biden's assistant health secretary, the Hungarian media outlet Philip Rakay commented on her election calling her a "[dad-mother](#)". In Hungary again, on International Women's Day (8 March), Justice Minister Judit [Varga](#) praised "real women" in a sarcastic Facebook post that suggested there was no room for the recognition of transgender people.

Anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial

On 18 October 2021, the Romanian parliament approved by a large majority a [new law](#) that will introduce the teaching of the Holocaust and Jewish history in schools as a compulsory subject starting in 2023. The move had become necessary because of ongoing and persistent anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial in the country. The legacy and explanation of this worrying trend is far from clear. The late philosopher and author Hannah Arendt described Romania as "the most anti-Semitic country in Europe" and hinted that anti-Semitism was not

necessarily connected with [Romania's dark role during the Holocaust](#). Whatever the case may be, one thing remains certain, anti-Semitic rhetoric and Holocaust denial are still flourishing in Romania's online space.

Following the introduction in 2015 of new legislation that [made Holocaust denial punishable](#) by up to three years in prison, Romania registered its first ever conviction as recently as February 2021. Many believe the infamous inefficiency of Romania's judicial system might have played a role in the apparent delay in successful prosecutions. A former Romanian Intelligence Service officer was [sentenced](#) after publishing several articles that denied the Holocaust happened.

In Bosnia, more than 25 years after the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, ethnic tensions continue to poison the social and political climate in the country. Following two major events, the [26th anniversary](#) of the Srebrenica genocide and the enactment of a [new law](#) in the Serb-dominated entity, Republika Srpska, which makes the crime of genocide denial more difficult to prosecute, there has been a further acceleration of genocide denial cases.

Misogyny and exploitation online

Women have also been targeted by many incidents of misogyny, sexism, and other cases of gender hatred online. In addition to widespread episodes of sexual harassment, we have witnessed cases of hugely offensive content including the misuse of an article about an [Afghan woman](#) who was allegedly sexually assaulted by Croatian police officers as a platform to publish misogynistic and xenophobic comments. In Serbia, [misogynist comments](#) targeted a woman who shared an image of herself being beaten by her male employer.

Women were also attacked for the sake of political confrontation and partisan interests. In Kosovo, a Kenyan politician [launched a misogynistic attack](#) on President Vjosa Osmani on Twitter, claiming that "a second wife in a polygamous marriage has been elected as the new president of Kosovo". The [exploitation of women](#) for political propaganda also happened in Romania where a PRO Romania party candidate promoted an electoral clip in which he led a group of men dressed as characters from The Men in Black movie to the town hall who then applied make-up to two women, purportedly secretaries.

Cyberviolence against women also took place in the form of online fraud. A 65-year-old Croatian woman was [conned](#) in March 2021 by fraudsters running an online loan scam. In April 2021, a [romance scam](#) was operated from a bogus social media account set up in the name of former Serbian Defence Minister targeted. The scammer(s) contacted an undefined number of women with the aim of luring them into online relationships and then conning them into sending them money.

Independent journalism remains at risk

Journalists, particularly those dealing with investigative and political issues, remain most exposed to the risk of online attacks. The Serbian, Bosnian and Hungarian digital environments have proven to be particularly “hostile” for journalists and independent media outlets.

In Serbia, journalists are the most frequently targeted party online (38 of 111 cases). Partisan attacks, political interference and an ever-increasing number of online death threats make journalists a very high-risk profession within the Serbian online space. Similarly, several independent Bosnian journalists have been on the receiving end of death threats and insults.

We have noted a rise in digital violations aimed at discrediting independent media and journalists not aligned with the ruling Fidesz party in Hungary, where almost [78 per cent of media companies are Fidesz party-friendly](#). Two pro-government outlets, Origo and Ripost, have regularly published false and unfounded accusations targeting political and civil society opponents, including the [attack](#) on an online summer event organised at the University of Theater and Film Arts (SZFE) last October 2020, where [art students occupied the building to protest government interference](#).

Conspiracy theories and fake news omnipresent

The spread of fake news, distorted facts and the [enduring appeal of conspiracy theories](#) among the public, remain widespread within all monitored countries. In particular, the flow of Covid-19 misinformation shows no sign of slowing. The well-known 5G/coronavirus conspiracy theory went viral in Bosnia on the back of an [article](#) published by Pravda-Istina and in North Macedonia, where [social media users spread untruths](#) about PCR tests. Members of the public alleged the PCR test was designed to implant microchips in the body and also claimed important data could be extracted with the help of 5G technology and genetic DNA sampling.

Conspiracy theories about Covid-19 vaccines have gone viral almost everywhere. In Hungary, the Index news portal published [several articles](#) on the animal anthelmintic and anti-parasitic drug Ivermectin, claiming it to be more effective than vaccines against Covid-19. In Serbia, a former Health Minister shared a [post](#) on Facebook claiming that the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine has been used as a “military weapon”.

In Bosnia, many news outlets have repeatedly spread falsehoods and conspiracy theories about the alleged side effects of the Covid-19 vaccine. In North Macedonia, another well-

known [conspiracy theory](#) alleging the involvement of Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates and the United Nations in the production of the vaccine has also gone viral. In Kosovo, news portal Front Online [published an article](#) on the case of an American nurse who allegedly passed out after taking the vaccine. In Croatia, several fake news stories about vaccines were shared by some Croat politicians and other influential public figures. In Montenegro, a citizen endorsed the Covid-19 lab-leak hypothesis and described the virus as “the fraud of the century”.

However, Covid-19 was not the only topic subject to fake news. The series of [earthquakes](#) that hit Croatia in late December 2020, led to the publishing of [false earthquake predictions](#), [fake warnings](#) and [other misleading information](#) – much of which are still available online. Lastly, several cases of disinformation have also concerned the issue of Afghan resettlement after the arrival of the first Afghan refugees in North Macedonia.

Phishing, online fraud and DDoS attacks

Mass phishing, computer fraud, cryptocurrency scams and other serious technical attacks have also frequently occurred in many countries. In Croatia, there were two significant cases of online fraud that led to thousands of Croatian social media users’ data being hacked and made available online.

In Hungary, the [Hungarian postal service](#), the internet provider [UPC](#), the [Semmelweis medical university](#), the [Hungarian internet provider Digi](#), the [gas and electricity provider NKM Energia](#), the Hungarian tax authority [NAV](#) and the [national surgeon general](#), were all hit by mass phishing emails fraudulently sent on their behalf. Several government websites, including the national vaccination webpage, were also hit by a [cyber-attack](#). Phishing scams and hackers have also targeted the [Serbian postal service](#) and the [Public Debt Administration](#).

In North Macedonia, two of the country’s biggest companies, [Komercijalna Banka](#) and [Makpetrol](#) were both subject to phishing scams in which fraudsters attempted to steal private data and other personal information from their customers. One of Romania’s biggest banks, [Banca Comercială Română](#) (BCR), was also targeted by scammers and, in August 2021, a report published by Bloomberg revealed that data from the Romanian Institute for Nuclear Research was [exposed](#) to Chinese hackers between 2017 and 2020. In Kosovo, the Central Election Commission (CEC) website, the property tax department of the Ministry of Finance, and the Facebook account of Zafir Berisha, the newly-elected National Coordinator for Cyber Security, were all targeted by hackers.

Social media impersonation

A further trend is impersonation by opening fake accounts on social networks, which occurred most frequently in Serbia and Croatia.

In Serbia, bogus accounts popped up on Twitter with users impersonating the [Serbian Minister of Construction](#), the [Serbian Minister of Culture and Information](#) and the [Juzne vesti](#) news website.

Meanwhile, in Croatia, bogus accounts were also created to impersonate celebrities, such as in the case of the singer [Massimo Savic](#), and other influential politicians including the [Croatian Interior Minister and the Speaker of the Croatian Parliament](#), and a [former Croatian President](#).

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Fact sheet

Total number of cases verified by BIRN between 1 August 2020 and 31 August 2021: 101

Number of verified incidents by month:

Aug 20	Sep 20	Oct 20	Nov 20	Dec 20	Jan 21	Feb 21	Mar 21	Apr 21	May 21	Jun 21	Jul 21	Aug 21
3	4	2	4	4	7	8	7	13	10	13	15	11

The most common violations by category*

- Pressures because of expression and activities on the internet: **100**
- Manipulation and propaganda in the digital environment: **36**
- Information security breaches: **22**

The most common subcategories of violations

- Hate speech and discrimination: **45**
- Other manipulations in the digital environment: **21**
- Insults and unfounded accusations: **20**
- Publishing falsehoods and unverified information with the intention to damage reputation: **16**
- Threatening content and endangering security: **16**

The most frequently targeted parties

- Citizens: **66**
- Public figures: **26**
- Journalists: **8**
- State officials: **7**
- Private companies: **3**

The most common attackers

- Citizens: **37**
- Online media: **27**
- Unknown: **24**
- Public figures: **17**
- State officials: **8**

* Some verified cases fall into multiple categories of cyber rights violations. Likewise, some content abuses more than one group of people and perpetrators may also be counted in more than one category.

Featured cases

Bosnia continues to suffer a worrying escalation of ethnic tensions that further jeopardises the already fragile political situation. Following the [withdrawal](#) of Bosnia's Serb-dominated entity, Republika Srpska, from many crucial institutions, including the armed forces, the political climate in the country has gravely deteriorated. To make matters worse, Zeljka Cvijanovic, President of Republika Srpska, [announced](#) on 13 October 2021 a new presidential decree that opposes [amendments to the Criminal Code of Bosnia](#) introduced [last July by the internationally-appointed High Representative Valentin Inzko](#), banning the glorification of war criminals convicted by final and binding judgments and the denial of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

All of this demonstrates the wounds inflicted during the bloody Balkan wars of the 1990s are very far from healed in Bosnia. Ethno-nationalism and seemingly insurmountable ethnic tension continue to poison Bosnian society, both on and off the web. Not surprisingly, almost half of cyber rights violations recorded in Bosnia and Herzegovina (45 out of 101) were hate speech and discrimination cases. It should be noted that hate crimes in Bosnia are [underreported and rarely prosecuted](#).

Recurrent themes identified in our database include Bosnian genocide denial, attempts to undermine independent journalism and abuse of the LGBT+ community and women. [Sarajevo's Pride Parade](#), held on 14 August 2021, triggered a dramatic surge in homophobic abuse. Similarly, the commemoration of the [26th anniversary of the 1995 Srebrenica genocide](#) generated violations connected to the denial of the genocide and the glorification of war criminals.

Cases defined in our database as manipulation and propaganda pervade the Bosnian digital space. A seemingly never-ending supply of unverified information and fake news about the pandemic and Covid-19 vaccines have been widely shared online. Coverage by some online news outlets have contributed to the spread of Covid-19 misinformation and fostered disinformation campaigns in the region. Our monitoring shows conspiracy theorists are currently churning out fake news about alleged side-effects of Covid-19 vaccines.

Journalists face death threats

Dragan Bursac, an award-winning journalist and columnist, received [death threats](#) in May 2021 from a 34-year-old man who threatened him on Facebook saying: "I'll kill you if you ever set foot in Montenegro. A bullet in the head and goodbyes!" Bursac believes he was targeted because of coverage and critique of right-wing nationalism in the region. A suspect was subsequently arrested.

In June 2021, two journalists from N1 television, Ferrer Gotic and Emela Burdzovic, received [threats](#) on Twitter after appearing on a live TV programme on 8 June 2021 which reported the final guilty verdict handed to former Bosnian Serb general Ratko Mladic following his unsuccessful appeal against his conviction for war crimes. "Karma is the strongest mother of all, it just fades slowly and when you least expect it to be charged you end up worse than the executors... just slowly...", one user tweeted.

Arduana Pribinja, an Al Jazeera journalist, was also [targeted](#) with insults and other online threats in July 2021 after the Qatar-funded channel reported that the State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA) was gathering evidence to identify alleged serious crimes endangering human health and abuse of office. Another journalist, Almir Panjeta, received several [threatening and insulting messages](#) in August 2021 after writing a supportive opinion piece about the Sarajevo Pride Parade for the [interview.ba](#) website.

The announcement that the [2021 Pride](#) march would be held under the slogan "Resistance from the Margins" led to social media users posting homophobic comments. Sanin Musa, a former Salafist imam, in an August 2021 [post](#) that went viral, called on his followers to oppose the march under his own slogan: "Don't give them your children! Join and raise your voice!"

The same month, the imam of the Ferhadija mosque in Sarajevo, Muhamed Velic, [condemned](#) the Pride Parade in a Facebook post, writing that "according to the teachings of Islam, homosexual intercourse is forbidden fornication and an abomination" and "true believers should not support this perversion". After the post spread quickly on social media,

Facebook removed the original post and versions on profiles that shared and supported it.

Misogyny and xenophobia

Our monitoring identified several online portals that have published misogynistic articles on women's physical appearance and clothing. In [one case](#), registered on 8 May 2021, the web portal antimigrant.ba used an [article](#) by the UK's Guardian newspaper about a young Afghan woman allegedly sexually assaulted by Croatian border police as a platform to publish sexist, misogynistic, xenophobic and racist comments. One comment read: "Why doesn't she return home, where no one but her husband is allowed to legally touch her breasts?"

In June 2021, Elvedin Pezic, a well-known Salafist imam, [posted a misogynistic comment](#) on his Facebook page that attracted hundreds of likes: "Western society morally collapsed the moment they took the woman out of the house, and then when the woman became everything but a MOTHER!!!"

One month earlier, Fuad Kasumovic, the independent candidate elected mayor of Zenica, was in the spotlight after [commenting](#) in the city council on a presentation by councillor Emmina Tufekcic that she "deserved a slap for every word". Kasumovic later said he was referring to her party and not Tufekcic personally.

Finally, in February 2021, Vojin Mijatovic, a member of the leftist Social Democratic Party (SDP), [insulted](#) Sabina Cudic, vice-president of the centrist socio-liberal Our Party (Naša stranka), referring to her gender by saying that she "screamed" words, thus implying she was hysterical.

Srebrenica genocide denial

On the [26th anniversary of the 1995 Srebrenica genocide](#) in eastern Bosnia, many [Twitter users](#) belittled and insulted the victims and survivors and glorified Bosnian-Serb General Ratko Mladic, who was [convicted of war crimes](#) in relation to the massacre by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague.

On 1 August 2021, journalist Branimir Djuricic from Radio Television of Republika Srpska (RTRS), [announced](#) that Camil Durakovic, president of the Municipal Assembly of Srebrenica, had filed charges against him for denying the 1995 genocide in Srebrenica. The journalist tweeted on 28 July 2021 the Srebrenica killings did not amount to genocide.

In a similar vein, Draško Stanivukovic, Mayor of Banja Luka, during a November 2020 [interview](#) for the N1 television station, said people should not recognise the Srebrenica genocide. His comments were condemned by numerous media outlets and politicians.

Bosnians vaccinated in Serbia branded "traitors"

As with the other countries where we are monitoring cyber rights violations, the Bosnian digital environment is crawling with fake news and unverified information about the pandemic and Covid-19 vaccines.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, conspiracy theories about vaccination combined with inter-ethnic mistrust after some people opted for vaccination in neighbouring Serbia because of the late roll-out of the Bosnian vaccine programme. This [sparked controversy on social media](#) about the quality of vaccines received by Bosnian citizens and about alleged hidden motives behind enabling people from Bosnia to get vaccinated. Some even portrayed immunisation as a "continuation of Serbia's aggression against BiH".

In April 2021, several religious personalities, including Sanin Musa, founder of the Faith, People, State movement and a professor of Islamic Sciences, branded those who had been jabbed in Serbia "traitors" and described the vaccines as "[untested poison](#)" designed to infect people with a new strain of coronavirus.

The Logicno website [published](#) an article in August 2021 titled "[Swiss police say 'No' to the Great Reset!](#)" arguing that the Swiss police started an uprising against the "big reset" by refusing to implement "imposed" restrictions to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Another case registered in August concerned a video in which a woman, whose daughter had been kicked out of school for not wearing a facemask, [claimed](#) that the vaccination programme was an experiment, that protective masks were dangerous and that the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention had said the virus has never been isolated.

Our monitors also registered [an article published](#) in July 2021 by the Bosnian news website Pravda-Istina claiming to have received an email from a European user with the actual number of deaths or injuries as a result of Covid-19 vaccination; labelling them "injuries from vaccine". The Justice and Truth portal in May 2021 [supported conspiracy theories](#) by stating that Covid-19 did not exist and that electromagnetic waves were created through the installation of 5G network infrastructure.

Back in March 2021, Pravda-Istina first [claimed](#) the pandemic was a deliberately planned project launched to destroy "[the livelihoods of all people to make them dependent on](#)

[the state](#)” before then changing tack to back another [conspiracy theory about 5G](#) mobile phone technology causing coronavirus in April 2021.

A further [episode of disinformation](#) involved a post by Facebook user Vesna Curguz who shared in July 2021 content claiming the Supreme Court in Uruguay had "ruled" Covid-19 did not exist and that the pandemic was nothing more than a fiction.

Croatia

Fact sheet

Total number of cases verified by BIRN between 1 August 2020 and 31 August 2021: 175

Number of verified cases by month:

Aug 20	Sep 20	Oct 20	Nov 20	Dec 20	Jan 21	Feb 21	Mar 21	Apr 21	Ma 21	Jun 21	Jul 21	Aug 21
9	9	16	14	16	15	17	19	12	15	11	14	8

The most common violations by category

- Pressures because of expression and activities on the internet: **83**
- Manipulation and propaganda in the digital environment: **82**
- Information security breaches: **28**

The most common subcategories of violations

- Other manipulations in the digital environment: **70**
- Hate speech and discrimination: **27**
- Computer fraud: **26**
- Insults and unfounded accusations: **20**
- Illegal personal data processing: **19**

The most frequently targeted parties

- Citizens: **130**
- Public figures: **23**
- Journalists: **14**
- State officials: **11**
- Online media: **6**

The most common attackers

- Citizens: **134**
- Online media: **24**
- Public figures: **11**
- Unknown: **10**
- State officials: **7**

* Some verified cases fall into multiple categories of cyber rights violations. Likewise, some content abuses more than one group of people and perpetrators may also be counted in more than one category.

Featured cases

From a total of 175 cyber rights violations, more than half (134) were committed by members of the public. This might surprise some, given the Croatian digital environment is a relatively open space where [people are generally free to engage in discussions of a sensitive nature without fearing surveillance or retribution](#). This high rate of violations, however, can be explained by the Coronavirus pandemic.

Conspiracy theories, Covid-19 vaccine disinformation, and the sharing and posting of a significant number of fake news items via social networks were predominantly the work of citizens. Members of the public were also active in spreading fake earthquake warnings after a [series of earthquakes hit Croatia in late December 2020](#).

Most online violations logged in our database were categorised as creating fake accounts or the paid promotion of false content. Indeed, there were 10 recorded violations of this type in Croatia out of a total of 18 across all monitored countries. Public figures, including the singer Massimo Savic and several Croatian politicians, have all been victims of online impersonation through the creation of fake social profiles.

As in other countries, there were many incidents of hate speech and discrimination with the LGBT+ and Roma communities targeted in particular – demonstrating that further action needs to be taken to protect vulnerable groups. In particular, following both the [ruling of the Croatian Constitutional Court](#) allowing same-sex couples to foster children (which echoed a previous ruling by the [Zagreb Administrative Court](#)) and the [Zagreb Pride March](#), cases of violations against the LGBT+ community soared. Antiziganism also remains a widespread problem and was identified in a significant number of digital rights violations that

targeted members of the Sinti and Roma communities.

Finally, the Croatian digital environment is characterised by a considerable number of computer fraud cases, 26 from a total of 103 cases across all countries monitored. We also recorded the most cases of illegal personal data processing in Croatia. High-profile breaches include the disclosure in April 2021 that hackers had accessed telephone numbers and other personal data belonging to more than [500 million](#) Facebook users worldwide, including hundreds of thousands of Croatian Facebook users. In November 2020 it was also discovered that [more than 47,000 user accounts](#) whose top-level domain originated in Croatia were in a hacked database collection.

Politicians spread Covid-19 disinformation

Of 175 logged violations, 70 were defined as other manipulations in the digital environment. As with many other countries, misinformation, fake news and other false claims about the pandemic and vaccines are rampant in the Croatian online space. Likewise, Croat politicians and public figures have contributed to the massive spread of Covid-related misinformation.

For instance, in July 2021 Vilibor Sincic, a Croatian MEP, shared [false information](#) about Covid-19, claiming to have personally contacted the European Medicines Agency (EMA) which he alleges confirmed that “they never tested the vaccine”. MEP Mislav Kolakusic [called](#) Covid-19 “a cold” and on 14 June 2021 [published](#) on YouTube an interview in which he claimed “the whole pandemic story is based on lies, untruths and misconceptions in absolutely all mainstream media”.

Media portals and experts have also shared distorted or false information. In September 2020, HOP, a Croatian news portal, published an [article](#) branding Covid-19 tests a “scam”, claiming they don’t detect whether people are infected. In July 2021, immunologist Srećko Sladoljev shared [false information](#) about Covid-19 vaccines claiming they contain a substance known as “graphene dioxide” allegedly responsible for postvaccination magnetism on tissues around the injection site. The claim, which wrongly refers to conspiracy theories about graphene oxide, was strongly denied by experts. Claims COVID-19 vaccines contain graphene oxide have been [debunked](#).

Sladoljev [also claimed](#) vaccines can poison the human heart in a post published on Facebook in April 2021 after [writing](#) in an earlier post that Mario Kerner, a gynaecologist from Zagreb, died after being vaccinated against Covid-19. However, according to a statement by the hospital director where Kerner was working, the gynaecologist had not been vaccinated and had in fact died from causes not related to the vaccine.

Finally, the conservative Croatian Catholic NGO Vigilare published in November 2020 [claims](#)

by Italian historian [Roberto de Mattei](#) of growing evidence that coronavirus was not only produced in a Chinese laboratory but that the Chinese Communist leadership deliberately released it as an act of "biological warfare". In a [video](#) published a month earlier, the historian declared no one should be surprised if the "ideological and psychological war" of communism was followed by biological warfare declaring this is part of their "programme for the future".

A [video](#) featuring a quote attributed to Karry Mullis, inventor of the Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test used to detect Covid-19, interpreted Mullis's words as evidence the tests cannot detect infections at all was widely shared among Croats in November 2020. The same month, another viral [video](#) showed an apparently empty Zagreb hospital falsely presented as proof Covid-19 does not exist.

Between March and July 2021, several incidents of false or distorted information were distributed including incorrect claims about [Covid-19 deaths in Portugal](#), photos of [French yellow vest protesters](#) incorrectly said to be protesting against Covid-19 restrictions, the collapse of Danish football player [Christian Eriksen](#) during Euro 2020 erroneously blamed on vaccination, a 1930s [cartoon](#) wrongly said to have predicted the pandemic, false claims [yellow ribbons](#) had been handed to vaccinated hospital patients to identify them for priority treatment, and false allegations that Croatian soldiers at the army base in the town of Gospic were subject to [forced vaccination](#) and fake claims of the compulsory vaccination of [vulnerable children](#).

Fake quake news

Besides Covid-19 disinformation, there have been a significant number of fake news stories about the series of earthquakes that hit Croatia in late December 2020. Indeed, misinformation and fake news cases related to the quakes skyrocketed at the time and many are still present on the web to this day - even though they have been [debunked by local fact-checkers](#).

Theories rapidly spread via Facebook that the actual magnitude of the earthquake – the epicentre of which was in Sisak-Moslavina county - had been [covered up](#). A 60-year-old man was [arrested](#) on 28 December 2020 for spreading panic among the population by persistently publishing and distributing fake news including false predictions of future earthquakes.

Another [fake quake warning](#) circulated in December 2020 via Instagram, this time alleging the Civil Protection Authority of Velika Gorica, the largest city in Zagreb County, had announced another imminent earthquake. Other incidents registered in December 2020 in-

clude the sharing of a [misrepresented photo](#) allegedly showing terrible damage to Petrinja, the town worst hit by the Croatian earthquake, which was actually taken four years earlier in Amatrice in neighbouring Italy. A statement by Viktorija Kaleb, deputy mayor of Petrinja, [blamed the quakes on a "higher power"](#) and suggested the earthquakes were a kind of punishment for human wrongdoing and bad behaviour.

And, finally, there was the false claim shared by Croatian social media users in January 2021 that [weapons had been discovered](#) after the earthquake in the village of Majske Poljane, which users alleged were hidden by ethnic Serbs.

Bogus celebrity social accounts

Ten cases of creating fake accounts and the paid promotion of false content were recorded in our database, making Croatia the country where we logged the highest number of such incidents. Politicians and celebrities are the key target for bogus account creation.

[Fake Instagram accounts](#) were created in February 2021 by unknown persons in the name of the famous Croatian singer Massimo Savic. One of the counterfeit profiles even sent private messages to his followers and fans, claiming to be "the real Massimo". One fake profile has since been deleted, the other, despite requests by the singer's team to delete it, has so far only removed all photos. Savic, in a [post published on his official Instagram](#) account, said the person behind the creation of the fake accounts "had a lot of free time and lacked intelligence".

The same month, fake Facebook accounts were created to impersonate Croatian MP [Bojan Glavasevic](#), Croatian Interior Minister [Davor Bozinovic](#) and the Speaker of the Croatian Parliament [Gordan Jandrokovic](#), and the former Croatian President [Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic](#). The fake account for Grabar-Kitarovic published a hoax claim that on Valentine's Day she would donate 5,000 kuna (approximately 660 euro) to the first 200 people who contacted her.

LGBT+ and Roma suffer hostility and abuse

Vulnerable people, including LGBT+ and the Roma communities, prove to be the main targets in cases of hate speech, discrimination, insults and unfounded accusations.

In the lead up to and immediately after the [July 2021 Zagreb Pride march](#), a significant number of cases of hate speech and discrimination [occurred](#). Before the march, on 2 July 2021,

Ivan Zidarevic, a Croatian gay activist, received several [threatening messages](#) via Facebook. One user wrote that activists were “hooligans” and to “run into a mob with an excavator would be priceless”. The [annual Pride Ride](#), held in June 2021, where cyclists protest against LGBT+ discrimination in the country, also sparked a notable acceleration of digital rights violations. Many Facebook users [commented](#) on the Pride Ride using offensive words, homophobic remarks with some even comparing LGBT+ people to paedophiles.

Finally, in March 2021, a TikTok user with nearly 20,000 followers [spread intolerance](#) sharing a video, viewed 27,000 times, in which he called homosexuality a disease and claimed LGBT+ people need to be beaten, suggesting a whip and a belt were suitable to use.

Anti-Roma sentiment remains widespread and is highly visible online. A protest held by Roma activists in front of the Czech Embassy in Zagreb after the death of Stanislav Tomas, a Czech Roma citizen who died in June 2021 while being restrained by police officers. The case was defined as the “[Czech Floyd](#)” in reference to the death of George Floyd in the US and the Black Lives Matters movement. The Croatian police denied any responsibility for the man’s death, claiming Tomas had died of a [drug overdose](#). Several international institutions, including the [European Commission](#) and the Council of Europe called for an independent investigation into the case. The incident led to a stream of anti-Roma comments being made and shared among Croatian Facebook users.

In May 2021, media outlets published news of a mass brawl between drunk men in the Parag settlement in the northern region of Medjimurje, home to a sizeable Roma community. Croatian Facebook users posted several [anti-Roma messages](#). Some accounts accused them of being “rapists”, another of being “more dangerous than the Brazilians of the favelas” while one user wrote: “Give them more social security to let them buy weapons and alcohol.”

Another episode involved Karlo Viducic, the secretary of the youth branch of the ruling Croatian Democratic Union in Zadar, who on 25 February 2021 in a post on Facebook referred to journalists from the Index website as “[gypsies](#)”. The word is widely regarded as a pejorative term among the Roma community and Roma minority MP Veljko Kajtazi strongly condemned the incident.

Online fraud, scams and data breaches

Croatia recorded the second largest number of computer fraud violations (26) after Hungary and topped our list of illegal personal data processing cases (19).

Online shopping fraud, cryptocurrency scams and phishing episodes have dominated the

Croatian digital environment. On April 3, 2021, a [massive breach of citizens' personal data](#) was revealed when a hacking forum member published the phone numbers and personal data of more than 500 million Facebook users worldwide, including data from almost 660,000 Croatian Facebook users. The leaked data included phone numbers, first and last names of users, CV data, users' geographic locations, and email addresses.

In March 2021, there were five different computer fraud cases, including a [phishing scam](#) in which fraudsters used bank account information to steal money. Also in March, [fake accounts](#) appeared on social networks advertising easy-to-get loans in which victims were told to make an initial payment for administrative costs. The would-be borrowers were then ignored or blocked by the fraudsters. The same month a 65-year-old Croatian woman was conned into paying an undisclosed amount of money to an individual to process a loan. She never received the money. In May 2021, a 48-year-old man was [defrauded](#) after investing over 200,000 kuna (26,300 euros) online in cryptocurrencies, stocks, gold and silver via a South African-based brokerage firm. A complaint has been submitted to the police.

One of the largest ever recorded [data leak cases](#) rocked Croatia in November 2020 after more than 23,000 databases were published. [CARNET](#), the Croatian Academic and Research Network, determined that the hacked databases contained more than 47,000 user accounts whose top-level domain ends with .hr (signifying Croatian origin) and that account passwords were available in plain text for as many as 24,000 users. With more than 226 million unique user accounts, the collection is said to have originated from the hacking forum Cit0Day.in. It operated by collecting hacked databases and then providing access to usernames, emails, addresses, and even cleartext passwords to other hackers for a daily or monthly fee.

Hungary

Fact sheet

Total number of cases verified by BIRN between 1 August 2020 and 31 August 2021: 150

Number of verified cases by month:

Aug 20	Sep 20	Oct 20	Nov 20	Dec 20	Jan 21	Feb 21	Mar 21	Apr 21	May 21	Jun 21	Jul 21	Aug 21
13	18	7	13	6	14	7	10	13	12	12	16	9

The most common violations by category*

- Pressures because of expression and activities on the internet: **83**
- Manipulation and propaganda in the digital environment: **37**, Information security breaches: **37**
- Information privacy and personal data breaches: **9**

The most common subcategories of violations

- Computer fraud: **37**
- Hate speech and discrimination: **35**
- Publishing falsehoods and unverified information with the intention to damage reputation: **31**
- Other manipulations in the digital environment: **27**
- Freedom of expression on the internet and the workplace: **7**

The most frequently targeted parties

- Citizens: **119**
- Political parties: **27**
- State institutions: **19**
- Public figures: **18**
- Private companies: **12**

The most common attackers

- Online media: **62**
- Unknown: **41**
- Political parties: **14**, State institutions: **14**
- Citizens: **11**
- State officials: **9**

* Some verified cases fall into multiple categories of cyber rights violations. Likewise, some content abuses more than one group of people and perpetrators may also be counted in more than one category.

Featured cases

Our monitory project has recorded a wide range of online hate speech and discrimination cases in Hungary with episodes of homophobia and racism recurring with extraordinary frequency. The propaganda of the ruling Fidesz party appears to play a crucial role in inciting and encouraging violations of digital rights against various vulnerable and minority communities.

Similarly, we have noted an alarming rise in publishing falsehoods and unverified information with the intention to damage reputation. These violations are commonly perpetrated by the ever-increasing plethora of pro-government media outlets. Indeed, media outlets were the culprits in 62 of 150 cases registered in our database. In Hungary, the takeover of independent media to silence critical voices remains one of the most pressing issues in terms of fading democratic norms. [Almost 78 per cent of the media is pro-government](#) and thus willing to wage war on political opponents - including the EU and NGOs - on the government's behalf.

Akin to all the other countries monitored, Covid-19 misinformation and the rise of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories is a common trend in Hungary. And, oddly enough, public figures such as the model [Timea Vajna](#) and the fitness coach [Norbert Schobert](#) have disseminated anti-mask theories. Other conspiracy theories are also frequently promoted and shared in the Hungarian digital space.

There have been serious incidents of mass phishing scams, denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks and algorithmic blocking or account suspension. Public institutions like the Hungarian postal service, energy supplier NKM Energia, the Hungarian tax authority and the national surgeon

general were all targeted after scammers sent emails that looked like they had been sent by these companies to trick Hungarian users into sharing personal data, including bank and credit card details.

Three complex DDoS attacks were also launched during the monitoring period. The [latest](#) of which hit several government websites in February 2021, including the home page for vaccination registration. On Facebook, we also registered five cases of algorithmic blocking and suspension.

Politicians exploit homophobic and racist views

The Hungarian social and political context seems to be characterised by highly divisive rhetoric and political propaganda. Cases of hate speech and discrimination targeting the LGBT+ community remain common practice within political debate. We have registered more than 20 incidents of discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

In August 2021, a pro-government media outlet [bama.hu](#) called [a children's storybook "LGBT propaganda"](#) and claimed it was harmful to children because the book contained drawings of rainbow families, including an image of a gay and lesbian couple playing with their children on the cover of the book. The same month the pro-government daily Magyar Nemzet [branded graffiti supporting LGBT+ people](#) that appeared in Bratislava as a provocative "LGBTQ vandal attack" inciting fear among local residents. The graffiti including slogans such as: "God is trans", "Trans is beautiful", "Gay power" and "[The] Gay revolution is coming".

Similarly, in July 2021, the pro-government outlet Origo [published](#) an article claiming the LGBT+ community wanted to break up families through sex education programmes in schools.

Many other cases of homophobic rhetoric also occurred earlier in our monitoring period. First, a [petition](#) to ban an LGBT+ party in Veszprem, a city in west Hungary, was [launched](#) on 11 August 2020 by a private individual and later reported and shared by pro-government media. Another [incident](#) was registered on 15 August 2020, which involved far-right fans of the Ferencváros football team [pulling down](#) and setting fire to a rainbow LGBT+ flag displayed at the city hall in Budapest's 9th district.

A further case concerned Előd Novák, a politician from the far-right Mi Hazánk party, who on 17 August 2020 [removed](#) the rainbow flag from Budapest Town Hall. The far-right, pro-government website [Pesti Srácok](#) published a long [homophobic article](#) on 18 August 2020

demanding, among other things, the criminalisation of “gender propaganda” and the “promotion” of homosexuality.

A significant number of cases have discriminated against transgender people. For instance, when Joe Biden named transgender paediatrician Rachel Levine his assistant health secretary, pro-government pundit Philip Rakay posted a [transphobic comment](#) on his Facebook page in January 2021 ridiculing Levine’s appointment, calling her a “dad-mother”. Similarly, the pro-government outlet Origo published a [homophobic article](#) in which it claimed that Biden is aiding “gender lobbies” and that the latter had the power to destroy humanity by erasing the “classical biological sexes”.

Finally, another case involved Justice Minister Judit Varga who posted a [transphobic post](#) on her Facebook account on the 2021 International Women’s Day (8 March). The post sarcastically praised “real women” in a “world where anyone is free to choose from almost a hundred sexes”.

Racism also pervades public debate and is at the core of many digital rights violations. In September 2020, [Fidelitas](#) - the Fidesz party’s youth movement - shared a racist meme as a story on its Instagram site. The picture, which showed someone measuring skin colours, hinted that the darker you were, the more likely you were to win an Oscar. Fidesz did not comment on the episode. A [racist article](#) was published in October 2020 on [vasarnap.hu](#), a website linked to Fidesz junior coalition ally the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP), that described the decision by toy manufacturer LEGO to include a darker-skinned figurine “problematic”. As is the norm in Hungary, the authors faced no consequences whatsoever for publishing racist content.

Another [racist article](#) was published in November 2020 and later [removed](#) from the pro-government daily Magyar Nemzet website that was written by Zsolt Bayer, who defended a racist slur used against black people and also accused African migrants of a robbery in the Canary Islands. Bayer also wrote a [homophobic editorial](#) in May 2021 arguing that “mentally ill, degenerate, perverted and disgusting sexual and other minorities” are intimidating “normal people”.

Critical voices subjected to smear campaigns

Our monitors recorded numerous cases of false and unverified information that was published with the intention to damage the reputation of others. From our database, it seems clear that pro-government media outlets have repeatedly targeted a large number of opponents ranging from independent media to political adversaries, European institutions and civil society organisations.

Two different episodes concerned opposition leaders in the Budapest mayoral office. In July 2021, the pro-government outlet Magyar Nemzet [falsely attributed](#) to Krisztina Baranyi, the opposition mayor of Budapest's District IX, the removal of the coats of arms of twin cities from the walls of the meeting room that houses the council. The twin cities were once part of Hungary but are still home to a number of ethnic Hungarians. According to the media outlet, Baranyi removed the symbol because she "despises" Hungarians living abroad. However, the coats of arms had merely been moved to another section of the same wall.

In June 2021, pro-government media and State Secretary of the Prime Minister's Office Csaba Domotor [falsely claimed](#) that the famous "flowerbed" roundabout in front of Budapest's Chain Bridge, one of the most well-known landmarks in the city, was to have been permanently closed by the opposition mayor of Budapest. In reality, the roundabout was rebuilt as part of renovation works on the bridge. Magyar Nemzet also published an [article in October 2020](#) accusing Andras Piko, the mayor of the 8th district of Budapest, of attempting to favour his deceased father in a construction deal. The claim turned out to be unfounded as the politician's father had died before the alleged incident.

On 3 August 2020, Origo published a [discrediting article](#) based on false statements about Peter Szauer, owner of the independent news portal [HVG](#). Similarly, in August 2020, Zoltan Varga, owner of Central Media Group which includes the independent news site [24.hu](#), was targeted with [insulting articles and false statements](#) by Origo, including describing Varga as an ["emotionless, profit-hungry and unscrupulous businessman"](#). Both Szauer and Varga were attacked for their critical stances against the government and for regularly publishing investigative stories on corruption cases.

Origo was also responsible for spreading [false statements](#) in September 2020 about a journalist employed by Politico, Lili Bayer, calling her "Soros's Brussels mouthpiece"; a reference to the Hungarian-American billionaire philanthropist George Soros whose Open Society Foundations support strengthening human rights and tougher anti-corruption measures.

Finally, Origo published [several false claims](#) in September 2020 about an online summer event at the Open University of Theatre and Film Arts (SZFE) where students in previous years had [protested against Fidesz reforms](#). The online event aimed to stimulate and encourage critical thinking against the old institutional set-up. Origo's article claimed the series of lectures were organised by the university's communications manager and attended by activist Marton Gulyas. However, neither the communications manager nor Gulyas were involved and the students themselves had organised the online event.

Pro-government media vilify EU and NGOs

EU and civil society organisations have also been subjected to fierce attacks, misinformation, falsehoods and unverified information. Intending to discredit both the EU and members of the opposition, several pro-government media [wrongly accused](#) Momentum MEP Katalin Cseh of having won EU tenders illegally via companies linked to her. Origo also published a [misleading article](#) in August 2021 titled Brussels wants LGBTQ propaganda in children's programmes too, arguing that the EU wants "gender propaganda" to be shown to children on national TV.

Furthermore, in August 2021, several pro-government newspapers [regurgitated false claims](#) that the EU wants to ban lavender based on a fake French news story. The fake story claimed that all French lavender imports would be barred but, in reality, the EU in a [draft regulation](#) wanted to simply change the labelling to emphasise the presence of some potentially harmful substances.

Civil society remains a key target for pro-government media. In July 2021, Mandiner, another pro-government outlet, [distorted the facts to argue](#) that the latest corruption analysis report of February 2021 from Transparency International Hungary was biased and lenient towards left-wing governments. US philanthropist Soros has been [falsely accused](#) of calling for NATO intervention in Hungary by the official website of the Hungarian Public Television on April 20, 2021. In November 2020 several pro-government sites [published an article](#) misrepresenting how Facebook removes content flagged as false by fact-checking organisations that have received grants from Soros's Open Society Foundation.

Anti-mask, anti-vax conspiracy theories

A substantial number of cases classified as other manipulation in the digital environment have been recorded in our database. Most of these violations involved Covid-19 misinformation and pandemic denial including the rising phenomenon of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories.

Surprisingly enough, several public figures have spread anti-mask theories. For instance, Norbert Schobert, a famous fitness coach, uploaded a [video](#) in April 2021 to his Facebook page, which has 1.2 million followers, to promote false theories that medical masks may contain roundworms that come from people's breath, causing pneumonia. In a similar vein, Timea Vajna, an influential model with almost 400,000 followers on Instagram, [posted](#) a story in August 2020 claiming that wearing masks does not stop the spread of Covid-19. After her post was picked up by the media Vajna claimed to have been joking.

At the same time, conspiracy theories claiming the pandemic is either a hoax or was deliberately created remain widespread online. In February 2021, several media outlets including [Origo](#) and [Pesti Sracok](#) cited a [study](#) by the physician and scientist Steven Quay that alleged that coronavirus was laboratory-derived. The study favoured the Wuhan lab-leak hypothesis which has been debunked by many leading scientists.

Zsolt Hencsei, a local representative from the Jobbik party in the southern city of Pecs, shared a [video](#) on 8 August 2020 in which a pharmacist, an influencer and a doctor claimed the Coronavirus pandemic did not exist and was part of a military training exercise.

Anti-vaxxers have also been busy online in Hungary. Three different videos were uploaded to Facebook claiming to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of Covid-19 vaccines. A video that went viral in August 2021 via Facebook [falsely claimed](#) Covid-19 vaccines are deadly because they destroy people's immune systems. In a [video posted](#) on 11 June 2021 on Facebook, Zsuzsanna Bardocz, a retired biologist, claimed that all Covid-19 vaccines were "[experimental gene therapies](#)" except for the Chinese vaccine. Independent MP Andrea Varga-Damm, [posted](#) a video on 4 May 4 2021 claiming vaccinated people are more vulnerable to Covid-19 than those who remain unvaccinated. Neither the political nor health authorities have condemned the incident.

Lastly, Index, one of the most prominent Hungarian news portals, published [several articles](#) in November 2020 about the animal anthelmintic or anti-parasitic drug called Ivermectin claiming it was effective against Covid-19. The claims were condemned by experts and the articles were removed from the Index website.

Phishing, DDoS attacks and algorithmic blocking

Eleven cases of phishing were also recorded in our database. Incidents include the sending of mass phishing emails fraudulently sent in the name of the [Hungarian postal service](#), the internet provider [UPC](#), the [Semmelweis medical university](#), the [Hungarian internet provider Digi](#), the gas and electricity provider [NKM Energia](#), the Hungarian tax authority [NAV](#) and the [national surgeon general](#).

On 19 February 2021, an extensive [cyber-attack](#) was launched against several government websites, including the home page for vaccination registration, a national consultation (polling site), the coronavirus information page, and the portal of the government ([kormany.hu](#)). The attack followed the commission of two other massive [DDoS attacks](#) recorded in September 2020 and covered in our [previous report](#).

Lastly, five cases of algorithmic blocking occurred on Facebook that suspended or removed specific content and/or accounts. The social network [blocked](#) the famous football meme site [Trollfoci](#) in June 2021, which was set up to poke [fun at Hungarian football](#). [Trollfoci was blocked after it posted what was intended to be a humorous response to Facebook's deletion of meme site Illiberal Meme](#). In May 2021, Facebook deleted [Illiberal Meme](#) after it published a post which was deemed to promote suicide in response to a parliamentary bill that made legal recognition of transgender people impossible.

A video made by singer [Vera Toth](#) was [blocked](#) by Facebook in April 2021 after users reported it because it encouraged people to follow anti-Covid-19 measures even after they had been vaccinated. The singer advised her followers to continue to wear masks and, if possible, stay at home in the days immediately following vaccination.

The Facebook account of [Bence Tordai](#), opposition MP of the Dialogue party, was [suspended](#) in March 2021. The politician said he had not posted anything that contravened Facebook's standards, adding he suspected pro-government users had filed reports to block his account.

Finally, in February 2021, Facebook [blocked](#) the educational page of the historian [Krisztian Ungvary](#), who launched a virtual Holocaust memorial tour on his page, after a far-right media outlet, Szent Korona Radio, reported it for hate speech. Facebook later restored the [page](#).

Kosovo

Fact sheet

Total number of cases verified by BIRN between 1 August 2020 and 31 August 2021: 79*

Number of verified incidents by month:

Aug 20	Sep 20	Oct 20	Nov 20	Dec 20	Jan 21	Feb 21	Mar 21	Apr 21	May 21	Jun 21	Jul 21	Aug 21
2	1	3	1	4	9	14	5	7	10	7	7	9

The most common violations by category**

- Manipulation and propaganda in the digital environment: **59**
- Pressures because of expression and activities on the internet: **14**
- Information security breaches: **7**

The most common subcategories of violations

- Other manipulation in the digital environment: **56**
- Threatening content and endangering of security: **4**,
- Hate speech and discrimination: **3**, Computer fraud: **3**, Breaches of citizens' personal data: **3**, Publishing falsehoods and unverified information with the intention to damage reputation: **3**
- Insults and unfounded accusations: **2**, Unauthorised access – unauthorised alterations and insertions of content: **2**

The most frequently targeted parties

- Citizens: **61**
- Political parties: **9**, State institutions: **9**
- Journalists: **8**
- Public figures: **6**
- State officials: **5**

The most common attackers

- Online media: **49**
- Citizens: **11**
- Unknown: **8**
- Online platforms: **6**
- Political parties: **4**

* The live database for Kosovo will be launched in 2022.

**Some verified cases fall into multiple categories of cyber rights violations. Likewise, some content abuses more than one group of people and perpetrators may also be counted in more than one category.

Featured cases

Of the 79 cases of cyber rights violations reported to our team, most by far (59) came under the category of manipulation and propaganda. A significant number of these involved false reports or misinformation about Covid-19, widespread but incorrect rumours about imminent lockdowns and alleged vaccine side-effects.

Political instability in a country that has held parliamentary elections no less than five times in the past 12 years has also contributed to a surge in fake news, misinformation, political attacks and a couple of incidents of hate speech in Kosovo's digital space.

While politicians and the public strongly support the prosecution of war crimes committed by Serbs, the legitimacy of the Kosovo Specialist Chambers in the Hague is the subject of fierce political clashes. Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti, for instance, has stated on several occasions that the work of The Hague court goes against the values and principles of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The court was set up to prosecute wartime and post-war crimes allegedly committed by the KLA between 1998-2000.

Former Kosovo President Hashim Thaci, who resigned from office in late 2020 to face trial for alleged war crimes at the Kosovo Specialist Chambers, and incumbent President Vjosa Osmani were both, albeit for different reasons, targeted by political opponents and members of the public and also, in Osmani's case, by a foreign politician.

We have witnessed an alarming number of cyberattacks and computer fraud, demonstrating

the fragility of Kosovo's online space and that much needs to be done to improve security. The Kosovo Central Election Commission (CEC) website, the property tax department of the Ministry of Finance, and the Facebook account of Zafir Berisha, the newly-elected National Coordinator for Cyber Security, have all been victims of cyberattacks.

Fake Covid-19 news thrives online

Kosovo's digital environment is also characterised by the widespread circulation of disinformation and fake news about the Covid-19 pandemic.

In a [post](#) published on 1 September 2020, the Kosovo National Institute for Public Health, citing a [Euronews article](#) based on an Oxford University report, ranked Kosovo among the countries that had implemented the most stringent measures to stop the pandemic. However, the [report](#) cited did not evaluate the performance of the measures taken - only the extent of different government responses to the pandemic.

Other cyber rights violations include fake news about the pandemic and the Covid-19 vaccine, false information shared via social media about the presidential announcement of a potential new lockdown and widely-disseminated misinformation about vaccine side-effects.

On 19 December 2020, Kosovo's news website Front Online [published an article](#) about Tiffany Dover, a nurse at CHI Memorial Hospital in Tennessee. The article, about a news story that [went viral globally](#), supported the false claim that Dover fainted shortly after receiving the Pfizer vaccine and generated many comments on social media attacking Covid-19 jabs, thus increasing general scepticism about vaccines.

The claim was later debunked as the nurse had made it clear she has a medical condition that makes her pass out when she feels pain. A CHI Memorial spokesperson also confirmed she had recovered quickly.

Polarised politics, misogyny and death threats

As noted earlier, Kosovo's highly-polarised politics and partisan interests have led to such pronounced political instability that [none of the last four parliaments has managed to complete a full term](#).

On 4 April 2021, Vjosa Osmani [became Kosovo's fifth head of state](#) since the country declared independence from Serbia, having served as acting president immediately after Tha-

ci stepped down. The second woman to hold the president's office after Atifete Jahjaga, Osmani has been subjected to numerous personal attacks and disinformation campaigns.

Shortly before Osmani won the presidential vote, Faton Peci, the president's personal advisor, [shared screenshots](#) of his Facebook account in which users made death threats against her. Peci, who strongly condemned the threats, said "a savage campaign against the acting president" was underway. The day after Osmani was elected president, Mike Soko, a Kenyan politician, falsely claimed in a [comment posted on Twitter](#) that "a second wife in a polygamous marriage has been elected as the new president of Kosovo". The statement had clear misogynist connotations in addition to being entirely untrue. Soko neither retracted nor apologised for his comments.

Various politicians, including [Betim Gjoshi](#), a Democratic Party of Kosovo MP, and [Besa Shahini](#), a Kosovo-born Albanian politician who served as education minister in Albania, attacked Osmani following her [interview](#) with the BBC on 19 March 2021. Gjoshi and Shahini criticised the president for disparaging Kosovo after she said that crime and corruption were among the biggest challenges facing the country. Following the online quarrel, Osmani and her political opponents were all targeted with hate speech in comments posted on social networking sites.

In another incident, three outlets published an [article](#) in February 2021 falsely claiming that Osmani was living in a luxurious house in Marigona Hill. The neighbourhood, which is the most expensive in the Kosovar capital, had been referenced by her allies in political attacks against opponents. As such, claims Osmani lived in Marigona Hill implied hypocrisy on the president's part. The claim was later revealed to be false by the [FactChecker-KS website](#).

After [Thaci's resignation](#) in November 2020, fake news stories began to emerge with several outlets falsely claiming he would await trial under house arrest. Fake news of this ilk is designed to undermine the legitimacy of the scope and powers held by the Kosovo Specialist Chamber in The Hague by portraying it as apparently unable to prosecute the former president of Kosovo.

Government websites hacked

Websites belonging to Kosovo's public and government institutions have also been hacked.

During the parliamentary election held on 14 February 2021, the Kosovo Central Election Commission website was hacked with the English-language version of the website showing commercials for Viagra. The attack was most likely designed to show how easily the official

government website could be hacked. The hacker(s) was not identified.

Two weeks later, the property tax department of the Ministry of Finance was targeted. The ministry said that [the hacker accessed the online service](#) and had printed property tax invoices and read personal data.

On 21 September 2020, shortly after his appointment as National Coordinator for Cyber Security, Zafir Berisha announced during an [interview](#) with KlanKosova that his Facebook account had been hacked. The hacker, who has not yet been identified, posted the following message on Berisha's Facebook profile: "Do not message me ... Just evaluate for yourself in whose hands cybersecurity is left."

Montenegro

Fact sheet

Total number of cases verified by BIRN between 1 August 2020 and 31 August 2021: 45*

Number of verified incidents by month:

Aug 20	Sep 20	Oct 20	Nov 20	Dec 20	Jan 21	Feb 21	Mar 21	Apr 21	Ma 21	Jun 21	Jul 21	Aug 21
3	2	3	3	3	4	6	2	5	2	5	3	4

The most common violations by category**

- Pressures because of expression and activities on the internet: **38**
- Information privacy and personal data breaches: **8**
- Manipulation and propaganda in the digital environment: **2**

The most common subcategories of violations

- Threatening content and endangering of security: **16**
- Hate speech and discrimination: **13**
- Publishing falsehoods and unverified information with the intention to damage reputation: **7**
- Breaches of citizens' personal data: **4**
- Publishing information about private life: **3**

The most frequently targeted parties

- Citizens: **25**
- Political parties: **6**
- State officials: 5, Public figures: **5**
- Activist: **4**
- Journalists: **2**

The most common attackers

- Citizens: **23**
- State officials: **5**, Political parties: **5**
- Online media: **4**

- State institutions: **3**
- Activist: **2**

* The live database for Montenegro will be launched in 2022.

** Some verified cases fall into multiple categories of cyber rights violations. Likewise, some content abuses more than one group of people and perpetrators may also be counted in more than one category.

Featured cases

Fake news and Covid-19 misinformation also loomed large in Montenegro's digital space. According to the rights violations BIRN has verified, both members of the public and Montenegrin politicians disseminated unverified and false information linked to the pandemic.

As in other countries covered by this report, hate speech and discrimination are rife in the Montenegrin digital space. National and religious minorities (including prominent figures of the Serbian Orthodox Church) and the LGBT+ community were most frequently abused online.

The arrest of members of the public who had posted threats or other hate speech on social networks appeared to be increasing in Montenegro. All arrests registered by BIRN monitors were made in accordance with Montenegrin law.

Covid-19 misinformation

As mentioned earlier, citizens and politicians were found to have spread misinformation and unverified reports about Covid-19.

Nikola Bajcetic, an MP for the opposition Democratic Front party, [posted on Twitter](#) on 1 August 2021 that the Montenegrin government was "[hostage to a gay satanic sect](#)" and accused Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapic and Parliamentary Speaker Aleksa Becic of supporting Satanist sects.

A Montenegrin citizen published false claims that the virus was made in a laboratory. In a comment posted on the Facebook page of news portal Vijesti on 7 December 2020, he

described the Covid-19 vaccine as “the fraud of the century”, claiming the virus is still not isolated and that all medical doctors were aware of that but are concealing the facts.

On 7 September 2020, Nebojsa Medojevic, another Democratic Front party MP, accused the Montenegrin authorities of curtailing people’s rights by imposing unnecessary Covid-19 restrictions and posted a tweet stating that the implementation of these measures implied interest by US philanthropist George Soros. On November 10, Medojevic also [posted](#) that Covid-19 is an artificially isolated biological weapon created after the US elections by the “global deep state”, drawing condemnation from civic activists and local media alike.

Abusers target religious and LGBT+ groups

After the [Ethno Village Montenegro](#) holiday resort in Pluzine announced on social media that it did not want to host same-sex couples, Maja Milickovic, a Montenegrin civic activist, [appealed to Montenegro's Ombudsman](#) Siniša Bjekovic to put an end to discrimination against the LGBT+ community. Although the activist petitioned Bjekovic specifically about the holiday resort episode, her aim was also to prevent a possible avalanche of similar “jokes” and actions by other entities. On 17 July 2021, the resort apologised on social media, stressing that all people were welcome and there would be no discrimination.

Following a [tweet](#) by civic activist Bojana Jokic criticising statements about the new government majority by novelist and writer Andrej Nikolaidis and Tamara Nikcevic, a journalist for the daily newspaper Pobjeda, during an interview on 1 January 2021, Nikcevic replied by [insulting the activist](#) on Twitter. She called Jokic a “chicken brain and intellectual and moral filth” in a tweet published on 4 January 2021. In response, the civic activist and head of the NGO [LGBT Progress](#) launched a [misdemeanour procedure](#) based on Article 7 of the Law on Public Order and Peace against the journalist. Nikcevic was questioned by the police on 11 January but the prosecutor dropped the charges on the same day.

On 22 February 2021, the news portal [IN4S](#) published readers’ comments that denigrated Croats including the use of the deeply insulting term “Croatian dog”. Adrijan Vuksanovic, president of the Croatian Civic Initiative, a national minority party, brought this [episode of ethnicity-based hatred](#) to public attention on 4 August by issuing a press release, during which he referred to a notorious 1995 military offensive during which hundreds of ethnic Serbs were killed by Croat forces: “There will be no other Operation Storm because no one will ever attack Croatia again”.

Three days after the IN4S incident, a member of the public from Podgorica [threatened](#) the Albanian minority in a post published on Facebook. The man wrote that Serbs from the

nearby Zeta area would occupy the mainly ethnic Albanian town of Tuzi. He said the government should let Zeta Serbs “take care” of their Tuzi neighbours; suggesting they should intimidate or even kill them.

Religious leaders have been used – and sometimes abused – in online content designed to threaten or ridicule groups of people. On 1 November 2020, the [police arrested](#) a 44-year-old pro-Serb supporter of the Serbian Orthodox Church after he published a photo of Bishop Joanikije of Budimlja-Niksic, from the Serbian Orthodox Church, calling him “a nightmare for the Montenegrin dog nation”. Police said he was arrested for hate speech and insults based on religious or national affiliation.

The Montenegrin Orthodox Church’s top bishop, Metropolitan Mihailo, reported that a [fake Facebook account](#) had been set up in his name. On 4 May 2021, the bishop said that comments fuelling inter-ethnic division had been published on the fake Facebook account. Despite calling on the media giant to suspend the fake account, it remains active and Facebook appears to have not yet made any decision on the matter. Finally, a Serbian Orthodox Church priest, Ivan Crnogorcevic, reported receiving [death threats via Instagram](#) to the police. On June 29, an Instagram user threatened Crnogorcevic, saying he would kill his family. Crnogorcevic also reported that the same Instagram user sent him a video of the Serbian flag in flames.

Arrests for panic-mongering and hate speech

The Montenegrin police appear to be increasingly [arresting members of the public](#) accused of posting hate speech, distorted facts or fictitious content via social media likely to provoke fear and/or panic among the public. Between July and October 2020, a number of citizens and [civil activists](#) were arrested for spreading fake news and abuse.

On 26 August 2020 an individual from the town of Danilovgrad [was detained](#) after posting insulting and threatening comments on Facebook about Montenegro President Milo Djukanovic and Petar Ivanovic, an MP from the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists.

Amid [growing tension](#) between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Montenegrin religious authorities around the Cetinje Monastery, Montenegrin police arrested a man for posting a video on social networks on 19 August 2021, [threatening](#) opponents of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. The man incited violence with the words: “Let’s go to Cetinje. We will kill and slay those against us. Let’s just bring two or three knives. Our five minutes have come.” On 29 October he was sentenced by a local court to a 10-month prison term.

Tensions further escalated in November when the [local council of Cetinje](#) called for the canonically unrecognised Montenegrin Orthodox Church to be allowed to use the historic Cetinje Monastery - antagonising the Serbian Orthodox Church, which claims ownership of the site.

Other cases of arrest for posting hate speech and inciting violence include the detention of a suspect who had posted a comment on Facebook calling for the killing of Serbs in Montenegro. On June 4, 2021, a Bosnian citizen residing in Montenegro was also arrested for threats made against the journalist Darko Sukovic and columnist Dragan Bursac. He was handed a four-month suspended sentence on 25 October for endangering the safety of journalists. Another [individual arrested](#) on 12 June 2021 for desecrating a monument to a World War II hero was sentenced on 18 November to nine months in prison.

Some arrests have, however, raised eyebrows, including that of activist [Omer Sarkic](#) who was accused of promoting anti-government protests after he published an ironic post on Facebook about some Montenegrin politicians silence over policing of protests in neighbouring Serbia.

North Macedonia

Fact sheet

Total number of cases verified by BIRN between 1 August 2020 and 31 August 2021: 66

Number of verified incidents by month:

Aug 20	Sep 20	Oct 20	Nov 20	Dec 20	Jan 21	Feb 21	Mar 21	Apr 21	May 21	Jun 21	Jul 21	Aug 21
5	6	9	5	6	5	4	4	3	4	4	5	6

The most common violations by category*

- Manipulation and propaganda in the digital environment: **39**
- Pressures because of expression and activities on the internet: **22**
- Information security breaches: **6**

The most common subcategories of violations

- Other manipulations in the digital environment: **38**
- Hate speech and discrimination: **16**
- Computer fraud: **6**
- Threatening content and endangering of security: **4**
- Publishing falsehoods and unverified information with the intention to damage reputation **2**, Publishing information about private life **2**, Other information privacy breaches **2**

The most frequently targeted parties

- Citizens: **42**
- State institutions: **22**
- State official: **12**
- Public figures: **5**
- Journalists: **4**, Political parties: **4**

The most common attackers

- Unknown: **31**
- Citizens: **17**

- Online media: **9**
- Public figures: **6**
- Journalists: **4**

* Some verified cases fall into multiple categories of cyber rights violations. Likewise, some content abuses more than one group of people and perpetrators may also fall into more than one category.

Featured cases

North Macedonia's digital sphere is permeated with episodes of disinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic and alleged harmful side-effects of Covid-19 vaccinations. Claims about attempts to inject people with microchips and links between the vaccines and 5G mobile phone technology, often casting Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates or the United Nations (UN) as the key behind-the-scenes architects, are also commonplace.

The arrival of the first Afghan refugees in Macedonia after the fall of Kabul also gave rise to online disinformation about migration numbers and fake news stories about the resettlement of Afghans.

Hate speech and discriminatory content targeting vulnerable groups is a regular occurrence, with the LGBT+ community, activist and racial or ethnic minorities most frequently subject to abuse. In particular, the ethnic Bulgarian minority still suffer episodes of online hate speech due to persistent friction between the two countries, as witnessed at the recent EU-Western Balkans summit in Slovenia.

Phishing scams and other online fraud cases were also recorded in our cyber rights monitoring database. Among many attempted fraud cases, one group of scammers tried to defraud Macedonian users by pretending to represent two of the country's biggest companies - Komercijalna Banka and Makpetrol.

Fake Covid-19 "news" dominates

There have been a wide range of violations in the Macedonian online sphere and more than half (38) have been logged by our monitors under the category "other manipulations in the digital environment". Most violations involve perpetrators making false or unverified claims and using them to manipulate the public. Fourteen cases involved disinformation, fake news

and misleading information linked to the pandemic and alleged side-effects of Covid-19 jabs.

In September 2020, the Facebook page [Opushteno](#) posted and shared misleading content regarding coronavirus vaccines, the billionaire philanthropist Gates and the UN. The [fake news story](#) claimed the UN had confirmed that a vaccine funded by Gates caused polio across Africa.

Our monitoring team picked up a case in October 2020 where accounts on Twitter and Facebook [shared false claims](#) that the PCR coronavirus test was designed to implant microchips in the body of tested people, through which, with the help of 5G technology and genetic DNA sampling, important data was being extracted. Similarly, in March 2021 one account on Facebook [claimed](#) it was technologically possible to put a chip in the Covid-19 vaccine which was then injected along with the vaccine itself. The post was later debunked by factcheckers.

A [further case of misinformation](#) involved the allegation made in March 2021 by several news portals that government officials had received Covid-19 jabs before health workers. At the time North Macedonia was short of vaccines. Government authorities later denied the false allegations via Twitter, saying the news portals were spreading disinformation.

Boban Nonkovik, a former Macedonian Information Agency (MIA) correspondent from Brussels and former journalist for the Macedonian right-wing daily newspaper Dnevnik, posted a [video](#) on Facebook in August 2021 that went viral in which he repeated [unverified claims](#) about alleged side effects of Covid-19 vaccines, presenting them as facts to the Macedonian public.

Similarly, a Twitter profile posted in July 2021 on alleged side-effects of the Covid-19 vaccine on younger patients, [claiming](#) to have witnessed three young men collapsing after being vaccinated. The tweet offered no evidence and was branded fake by many other Twitter users. In addition, [false rumours](#) about the permanent closure of the main vaccination centre in North Macedonia, located in the Boris Trajkovski arena, were shared in November 2021. The mayor of the municipality later denied the false claims.

Public misled over Afghan refugees

The arrival of Afghan refugees in North Macedonia after the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August 2021 led to several disinformation campaigns and mass-sharing of fake stories. Several online media published misleading information on refugee numbers with some reporting the [arrival of 300 Afghans](#) accompanied by [photos](#) showing only men, no women

or children, as part of a refugee column allegedly headed to the country. At that time, no Afghans refugees had entered the country and all of the photos that were shared were outdated and originated from other countries.

The news stories, in the same vein as coverage during the 2015 European migration crisis that culminated with the [erection of a fence](#) on the Greek border, was designed to further reduce public empathy with migration issues and present migrants as a threat to Macedonian culture and way of life.

A [further episode](#) involved a statement made by Bojan Stojanoski, an MP from the main opposition party VMRO-DPMNE, in April 2021. Stojanoski claimed that Norwegian military experts had assessed the Macedonian chief surgeon leading a team preparing for a mission in Afghanistan and concluded he could not perform primary surgical interventions. Stojanoski not only undermined the quality and capabilities of North Macedonia's surgical team in Afghanistan but also indirectly attacked the centre-left ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) management of health services.

LGBT+ community and rights activists targeted

Our database also contains 16 incidents of hate speech and discrimination against minorities and other vulnerable groups registered during the monitoring period, including the LGBT+ community, civil society organisations, activists and other racial or ethnic discrimination incidents.

On 27 May 2021, a series of false claims were made against the LGBT+ community in North Macedonia which were posted on social media channels. A Facebook page administrator for an online store [falsely claimed](#) that clothing products and materials were used and marketed as a means of indoctrinating North Macedonians with, as he said in the post, "LGBT ideology". The administrator also called for a boycott of handmade products and posted derogatory comments about online shoppers. In addition, he posted offensive and discriminatory responses to people who responded to his Facebook posts.

Another [manipulative tweet](#) was posted in August 2020, when an anonymous user tweeting under the name Marga claimed that activists from human rights and arms control NGO [Civil](#) had made death threats against Twitter users who support opposition parties. Denis Jankulovski, a health activist, was also [subjected to a stream of online abuse](#) in September 2020 after he advocated the use of masks and social distancing to stop the spread of Covid-19.

Misogyny, racism and ethnicity-based bigotry

The Macedonian ethnic community was targeted by a TikTok user who [posted](#) in September 2020 a video featuring offensive lyrics and ethnically-motivated hate speech. The video was later removed. One month later, North Macedonia's second division football club Sasa [posted disparaging](#) comments on its official Twitter profile about playing a club that had a black player on its team.

In November 2020, Zoran Ivanov, a prominent journalist and supervisory board member of the state news agency MIA, wrote a [hateful tweet](#) containing sexist profanities and derogatory remarks about Bulgarian Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva and former Greek diplomat Dora Bakoyannis. The MIA began a [dismissal procedure](#) against the journalist following a disciplinary hearing.

Finally, in a climate of [growing political tension](#) between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, Vasil Garvalniev, the singer who represented North Macedonia in the 2021 Eurovision Song Contest, was subjected to hate speech and abuse on social networks after he was accused of spreading Bulgarian propaganda. Twitter users started posting [abusive comments](#) in March 2021 after [an old media interview from February 2020 resurfaced](#) in which the singer said he has dual Bulgarian and Macedonian citizenship.

Online scams

Several incidents of phishing scams and online fraud have also been recorded, including a [fraud attempt](#) targeting Netflix users, a [phishing scam](#) in which unknown confidence tricksters claimed they were representing one of the biggest banks in North Macedonia, Komercijalna Banka, and requested clients give them their bank account details.

Other significant computer fraud cases logged by our monitoring team involved the [fraudulent use of data](#) from Macedonian citizens to apply for loans plus the [attempted fraud](#) by unknown perpetrators who contacted members of the public claiming to represent North Macedonia's largest oil company in order to obtain personal information such as phone numbers or other contact details from .

Romania

Fact sheet

Total number of cases verified by BIRN between 1 August 2020 and 31 August 2021: 72

Number of verified incidents by month:

Aug 20	Sep 20	Oct 20	Nov 20	Dec 20	Jan 21	Feb 21	Mar 21	Apr 21	May 21	Jun 21	Jul 21	Aug 21
7	6	7	6	4	6	9	6	1	4	3	5	8

The most common violations by category*

- Information privacy and personal data breaches: **29**
- Manipulation and propaganda in the digital environment: **25** Information security breaches: **25**
- Pressures because of expression and activities online: **24**

The most common subcategories of violations

- Other manipulations in the digital environment: **23**
- Breaches of citizens' personal data: **20**
- Hate speech and discrimination: **12**
- Other violations: **11**
- Computer fraud: **10**

The most frequently targeted parties

- Citizens: **55**
- State institutions: **11**
- Public figures: **9**
- State officials: **4**
- Private companies: **3**

The most common attackers

- Citizens: **35**
- Unknown: **18**
- State officials: **7**
- State institutions: **5**
- Public figures: **4**

* Some verified cases fall into multiple categories of cyber rights violations. Likewise, some content abuses more than one group of people and perpetrators may also be counted in more than one category.

Featured cases

Our monitors noted a shocking number of sex offences, including child sexual abuse, in Romania's online space. Covid-19 restrictions on the movement of people has, according to the Romanian Directorate for Investigating Organised Crime and Terrorism (DIICOT), led to an alarming [increase in detected obscene material featuring minors](#). Perpetrators include individuals and organised gangs.

Misogyny, anti-Semitism and offensive material targeting ethnic Germans, including the Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, also feature regularly. A representative of the Jewish minority in Romania's parliament, Silviu Vexler, [was subjected to a torrent of anti-Semitic abuse](#) on Facebook in January 2021.

Cyber fraud, phishing and other online scams proliferate although DIICOT prosecutors announced they had arrested several organised criminal groups that had been operating locally and internationally between [November 2020](#) and [July 2021](#).

Child abuse and human trafficking

Several cases of human trafficking, sex-related offences and abuse of minors were recorded in our database, demonstrating how those kinds of violations are widespread in the Romanian digital landscape.

In July 2021, a high-school teacher from Piatra Neamt, north-eastern Romania, who allegedly asked one of his pupils to send him nude photos via Facebook, was subject to a [criminal](#)

[investigation](#). The investigation is still in progress and the professor does not appear to have been formally indicted.

A case in February 2021 concerned the [arrest](#) in southwestern Dolj County of a man accused of recruiting an unspecified number of minors online whom he then allegedly coerced into sending him sexually explicit images of themselves.

Two other cases involving the sexual abuse of minors were logged in February 2021. A person was [arrested](#) in the eastern county of Vrancea for storing and distributing material showing the sexual abuse of minors online. A separate [investigation](#) was launched into allegations a different suspect produced and distributed obscene material via social networks. The footage showed sexual activity with a minor, who was also his ex-girlfriend. The suspect is said to have shared the images after they broke up.

In December 2020, an individual was [arrested](#) for allegedly grooming minors online before coercing them into sharing sexually-explicit images of themselves and suggesting they have intercourse. In the same month [two men were arrested](#) in Bistrita County, northern Romania, for allegedly filming themselves having sex with a minor with the intention of distributing the video on social networks. The men are currently standing trial.

The Romanian authorities also arrested an online international gang in July 2021 accused of [prostitution offences](#) after allegedly luring women into sex work via matrimonial dating websites.

Holocaust denial, misogyny and ethnic bias

Twelve cases of hate speech and discrimination were also recorded in our database. Incidents of anti-Semitism and holocaust denial appear to be the dominant form of hate speech in Romania's digital space. Nearly half of our logged cases (5 out of 12) featured hostility, prejudice or discrimination against Jewish people.

On 27 March 2021, Romanian police officers [arrested](#) a person suspected of emailing death threats to the famous Jewish actress and theatre director Maia Morgenstern. The sender said he intended to throw Morgenstern "into a gas chamber". The criminal complaint is still being investigated by prosecutors. As mentioned earlier, Silviu Vexler, an MP from the ethnic minority party Federation of the Jewish Communities in Romania, was sent many [anti-Semitic comments](#) on Facebook after commemorating the 1941 massacre of Jews by the Fascist Iron Guard.

Vasile Zarnescu, a former Romanian Intelligence Service officer, was [sentenced](#) in February 2021 to a suspended one-year prison term after being found guilty of Holocaust denial. The case was the country's first ever conviction for Holocaust denial. The court ruling referred to several articles signed by the officer under titles such as The falsity of the notion of the Holocaustologist and The scam of the 20th Century.

The Facebook account ran by Gheorgheni City Hall in Transylvania's Harghita County was found by the National Council for Combating Discrimination in March 2021 to have [discriminated against](#) non-Hungarian speakers by using only the Hungarian language on its official page. Over 80 per cent of the locals are native Hungarian speakers.

An investigation has been launched into the publication of a highly offensive misogynist and [xenophobic attack](#) in June 2021 on Facebook by the Social Democratic Party regional councillor Ioan Micu. The attack on French-born Romanian Mayor of Bucharest's Sector 1, Clotilde Armand, included the words "in France she would have been kidnapped and gang-raped".

We also logged a [misogynist incident](#) involving a PRO Romania party candidate who made an election campaign video showing him lead a group of men dressed as the lead characters from The Men in Black movie to the town hall dressed who then applied make-up to two women who appeared to be secretaries.

Hacking and online scammers

Online fraud pervades Romania's digital landscape. Our database recorded ten cases of computer fraud, eight cases of unauthorised access and several other cases of information security breaches. Being the most populous country among those monitored, Romania appears to be particularly exposed to large-scale frauds, involving thousands of Romanian citizens.

At the same time, Romania also stands out as the country with the highest number of cases (20) involving breaches of citizen data. In August 2021 alone we registered four incidents. One [case, reported by Bloomberg](#) on 4 August, revealed the [exposure of data](#) from the Romanian Institute for Nuclear Research by a group of hackers affiliated with the Chinese government between 2017 and 2020. On 9 August, a [phishing scam](#) hit customers from the popular e-commerce website [Publi24.ro](#), asking them to provide credit card details outside the online platform.

Just a few days later, on 11 August, cybersecurity experts intercepted a fraudulent CN Poșta Română SA (Romanian Post) [phishing scam](#) where thousands of Romanians were asked to pay extra fees by entering their credit card details. A fourth episode, logged on 12 August, concerned the attempted [blackmail](#) of the Romanian singer Elena Ionescu. She said Russian hackers accessed her Instagram account, changed the security codes and demanded she pay 1,000 euros to regain control of the account.

Romania's cybersecurity agency, CERT-RO, warned users in February 2021 about a [wave of phishing attacks](#) in which unidentified criminals pretended to be private bank officials from Banca Comercială Română (BCR), the most important financial services group in Romania, and then asked customers to disclose their account and card details via a link provided. In the same month, Romanian authorities captured another criminal enterprise devoted to [fake money transfers and sale of cryptocurrencies](#).

Serbia

Fact sheet

Total number of cases verified by BIRN between 1 August 2020 and 31 August 2021: 111

Number of verified cases by month:

Aug 20	Sep 20	Oct 20	Nov 20	Dec 20	Jan 21	Feb 21	Mar 21	Apr 21	May 21	Jun 21	Jul 21	Aug 21
13	2	9	13	8	11	7	8	9	5	9	9	8

The most common violations by category*

- Pressures because of expression and activities on the internet: **85**
- Manipulation and propaganda in the digital environment: **29**
- Information security breaches: **12**

The most common subcategories of violations

- Insults and unfounded accusations: **30**
- Threatening content and endangering of security: **29**
- Other manipulations in the digital environment: **18**
- Pressures because of publishing information: **15**
- Computer fraud: **8**

The most frequently targeted parties

- Citizens: **37**
- Journalists: **30**
- Public figures: **12**
- Online media: **9**, Investigative media: **9**
- Investigative journalists: **8**

The most common attackers

- Citizens: **46**
- State institutions: **13**, Unknown: **13**
- Online media: **12**
- Private companies: **8**
- Online platforms: **7**

* Some verified cases fall into multiple categories of cyber rights violations. Likewise, some content abuses more than one group of people and perpetrators may be counted in more than one category.

Featured cases

Journalists in Serbia are one of the most frequently targeted parties online. In 30 of the 111 cyber rights violations logged in our database (38 if you include investigative journalism) journalists were subjected to online abuse and intimidation - with an alarmingly high number receiving death threats.

Attacks launched by some ruling party members to discredit independent media seem to occur ever more frequently as political interference in the work of journalists in Serbia remains a problem. Our data shows a disturbing rise in the number of journalists who have been on the end of death threats for simply doing their jobs, including Ivana Jeremic, BIRN editor and investigative journalist.

Media outlets and tabloids reporting migration issues provoked floods of hate speech and anti-migrant commentary. Cyberviolence against women appears to be rampant and, worryingly, our monitoring suggests online violent misogyny is on the increase. Activism is under threat too, as evidenced by the case of one prominent Serbian LGBT+ activist and drag queen, Alexis Plastic, who received death threats on TikTok.

Conspiracy theories, fake news and disinformation about Covid-19 are also commonplace. The conspiracy theory that Microsoft co-founder and billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates is using the pandemic as an opportunity to microchip people and the video shared by an Austrian MP on Coca-Cola testing positive on a PCR test went viral in the Serbian digital environment.

Computer fraud, phishing scams and other cyberattacks, albeit few in number, have also occurred, exposing the vulnerability of some Serbian public IT servers. The Serbian postal service and the website of the Public Debt Administration were hit by dangerous phishing scams and hacker attacks launched by foreign hacker groups and other, unknown culprits.

Journalism under siege

Of all monitored countries, Serbia has the highest rate of online attacks on journalists. In many instances, the underlying motive for these attacks is quite evidently to undermine independent journalism. Journalists who have published information that reveals wrongdoing or could embarrass those with power are deluged with online insults, baseless accusations, intimidatory content and, as noted earlier, death threats.

On 10 March 2021, Vladimir Orlic, a Serbian Progressive Party MP, tweeted about the so-called "tycoon media" implying the investigative portal KRIK was "trying to criminalise and libel a whole family" – meaning Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and his relatives. The portal had in previous articles published photos of Vucic's eldest son Danilo in the company of some members of the infamous Montenegrin Kavaci clan.

It is noteworthy that several incidents we logged took place on Twitter. The investigative journalist Andjela Milivojevic, after tweeting about a press conference held by President Vucic during which footage showing the bodies of victims of organised crime violence was shown, was attacked by political trolls on 7 March 2021. Some of these tweets accused the journalist of intentionally lying and serving opposition politicians.

The local branch of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in Vranje, a city in southern Serbia, issued a press release on 15 October 2020 that contained numerous insults about Slavomir Kostic, a journalist from infoVranjske. The journalist was called "poor", "human garbage and scum", and "human faeces" after he wrote a news article warning residents of Vranjska Banja, one of Vranje's two municipalities, about the delay in introducing central heating by the municipal authority for four buildings in the city centre. In the article Kostic wrote that since district heating will most likely be introduced only after the New Year, the tenants involved will have to prepare wood for home fires in time.

Republican Party President Nikola Sandulovic, posted on Facebook on 12 February 2020 calling for people to boycott investigative journalists Milica Šaric and Ivana Jeremic, claiming they were working for the "deep state" of George Soros and the Devil. He also falsely accused them of flagging his Facebook posts as fake news.

Intimidation and death threats

Further analysis of online threats against journalists seems to suggest that there is no specific line of argument, area of discussion or type of journalist/journalism that generates the most online threats. Journalists working across a wide range of outlets covering differing topics were subject to harassment and intimidation including death threats.

In June 2021, NewsMax Adria TV journalist Zeljko Veljkovic was insulted and sent death threats after writing an article mentioning the Srebrenica genocide of 1995 and crimes committed by Serbian forces against ethnic Albanians in the 1990s. In the same month, Serbian journalist and writer Marko Vidojkovic received threatening messages via Instagram after he commented on the recent life sentence of former Bosnian Serb army chief Ratko Mladic for war crimes committed in Bosnia in the 90s on a TV show he co-hosts.

IN Medija portal journalist Verica Marincic, who has already been the victim of numerous episodes of assault and harassment by the extreme right and Serbian nationalists, was targeted with insults and death threats in a series of Facebook posts in April 2021. The messages were most likely a reaction to proposed changes to the Serbian Constitution by the National Assembly in various matters, including the judiciary, without consulting opposition parties, which only IN Medija reported.

In March 2021, Dragan J. Vucicevic, owner and editor-in-chief of the pro-government tabloid Informer, was threatened by an anonymous user who declared Vucicevic “must be killed” in comments posted under an article about speeding drivers on the outlet’s website. TV Pink journalist Gordana Uzelac was also targeted with death threats sent from two Instagram accounts in February 2021. There seems to be no obvious motive for these attacks.

In January 2021, several cases of death threats against journalists were also recorded in our database. Brankica Stankovic, editor of the Serbian investigative media company Insajder, was targeted with death threats on Twitter on 17 January after commenting on rape allegations made by a Serbian actress. Vojislav Milovancevic, a nova.rs journalist, received death threats on Twitter in January 2021 sent from anonymous accounts after he wrote about an alleged case of sexual abuse at the Serbian Orthodox Church's Faculty of Theology in Belgrade. The journalist also filed a criminal complaint with the Cybercrime Prosecutor's Office asking it to investigate the threats. On 25 January, the journalist Ivan Kovacevic, editor of Podrinjske novine, was sent [threatening comments](#) after publishing a critical review online of an interview with Aleksandar Pajic, Mayor of Šabac, a city in western Serbia.

There were also four incidents of online threats published via Twitter in December 2020.

BIRN editor and investigative journalist Ivana Jeremic was threatened on 2 December by a Twitter user. On the same day, Milica Šaric, editor-in-chief of the Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia (CINS), was threatened and insulted by a Twitter user. The deputy editor-in-chief of the weekly NIN, Vesna Mališic, was also targeted on 7 December by several insulting and threatening tweets. Finally, journalists of the Juzne vesti portal received death threats against them and their families in response to the publication of an article on migrants.

Cyberviolence against women

Women are frequently targeted online in Serbia. Analysis of a series of these cases registered in our database suggests that cyberviolence against women is somewhat endemic.

Following a case in November 2020 where a photo of a woman undressing was secretly taken at one of the COVID-19 hospitals in Belgrade, other significant online violations of women's rights continued to occur. In July 2021, a woman was inundated with insults and gender-based harassment via Twitter after sharing images of herself being beaten by her male employer. Many users blamed her for the violence she suffered because she had stood up to her employer.

One episode of so-called romance scams was tracked in April 2021 and involved the creation of fake accounts in the name of former Serbian Defence Minister Dragan Šutanovac. The bogus accounts were set up to lure women into online relationships and then con them into sending the scammers money.

Cybercrime prosecutors launched an investigation after discovering Telegram chat groups containing explicit photos and videos of women. The group published and enabled the exchange of explicit photos and recordings of girls without their consent. Some of the chat groups were named after cities in Serbia, further identifying the victims, some of whom were minors, according to the official statement of the competent authorities. The person suspected of being the administrator of the Telegram groups was arrested on 11 March 2021.

Activists and migrants targeted

Several hate speech, discrimination and fake news cases were linked to activism and migration. Serbian LGBT+ activist and drag queen Alexis Plastic, DJ host of the podcast Tetke and one of the most active personalities in the Belgrade Pride parades, received a death threat via TikTok on 31 August 2021, which was reported to the interior ministry's cybercrime unit.

The activist also wrote that in the last seven years she had reported more than 100 death, rape and family murder threats which had not been prosecuted.

In March 2021, Milan Vujic, a Serbian civil social activist and student from Novi Sad, was arrested and questioned by the police after reporting via Twitter on the assault of politician Dragan Djilas' child. Djilas is president of the socialist and centre-left Freedom and Justice Party. Vujic said police questioned him to see if he had further information about the case, of which he says he has no more details than what had already been reported by the media. The activist, who has been an outspoken advocate of liberal and anti-nationalist views, was released after about six hours.

Pro-government tabloid Alo published in September 2020 a private photo of activist Radomir Lazovic from the Let's Not Drown Belgrade movement – a leftist, green collective of citizens originally set up in 2015 to [oppose the controversial Belgrade Waterfront project](#) - in an attempt to discredit him. In the photo, where the activist was lying on the ground, Lazovic was falsely accused of being intoxicated and deceiving foreign donors into paying fees for a project he was involved in. On 1 August 2020, Deputy Mayor of Belgrade Goran Vesic, published an insulting post on his official Facebook page calling fellow Let's Not Drown Belgrade activist Dobrica Veselinovic a "sadist and sick" after she visited a construction site in Belgrade to draw public attention to the issue of construction workers being injured and killed on sites.

Similarly, migration continues to be a highly divisive topic and has been the subject of a range of digital rights violations. In August 2021, an Instagram page titled Borca Against Migrants posted insults against the migrant population in the Borca neighbourhood in Belgrade, asking users to submit information about migrants. A month earlier, some tabloids and right-wing groups on social media had spread fake news about the murder of a 63-year-old woman in the city of Sombor, accusing migrants of committing the crime. Serbia's Interior Ministry denied migrants were responsible for the murder.

Finally, after reporting the fatal stabbing of an Afghan migrant on April 13 at the Banja Koviljaca bus station, the Facebook page of RTV Pannon, a media outlet that reports news in Hungarian and Serbian, was inundated with comments from readers supporting violence against migrants.

Conspiracy theories and bogus accounts

We logged 29 cases of manipulation in the digital environment in Serbia, which is in fact a relatively low number compared to some other countries covered by our monitors.

On 29 July 2021, Nebojša Bakarec, an MP with Vucic's SNS party, shared a [doctored image](#) of Marinika Tepic, a key figure in the socialist Freedom and Justice Party, on Twitter. The photo depicted Tepic with Veljko Belivuk, who stands [accused of running a criminal group](#).

Nada Kostic, a medical doctor who served for a short period as health minister between October 2000 and January 2001, was already in the spotlight after sharing a [series of conspiracy theories](#) before she posted on Facebook on 12 April 2021 claims [the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine has been used as a "military weapon"](#). The post was later deleted. A video of an Austrian MP claiming that Coca-Cola tested positive on a PCR test was widely shared on Facebook in December 2020.

The creation of bogus websites and social media accounts is common practice in the digital arena too. On the web, a fake version of the Juzne vesti news website appeared in February 2021 under the domain juznevesti.info and carried content designed to discredit the real Juzne vesti site and its editor-in-chief, Gordana Bjeletic.

In January 2021, a message from a bogus Twitter account that impersonated the Serbian Minister of Construction Tomislav Momirovic sparked outrage among Twitter users by tweeting a call for "slackers" to clear up heavy snow across Serbia. In November 2020, Italian journalist Tommaso Debenedetti created a false account in the name of Serbian Minister of Culture and Information Maja Gojkovic which tweeted multiple fake announcements that a convicted Serbian war criminal had died.

Fraud, phishing scams and hackers

While this category of digital rights' breaches appears less significant in numerical terms, some worrying violations have emerged and are worthy of attention.

Online fraud has often taken the form of sneaky scams and phishing campaigns. On 22 June 2021, the Serbian branch of the Raiffeisen bank warned its customers of a scam campaign in which clients were asked to update their details in the banking system due to "unusual activity" in their bank accounts. In addition, two fraudulent episodes have involved the Serbian postal service. Citizens were asked to pay a delivery fee, falsely presented as due and unpaid, by entering credit card and other financial information.

A few incidents of cyberattacks and unauthorised access have also been reported to our monitoring team. The Serbian environmental organisation Eko straza (Eco Watch) said a hacking attack took down its website. Local portal FAR, which publishes news in Serbian and

Bulgarian, was targeted by a technical attack that disabled its website, database and other published content.

On 16 July 2021, a Turkish hacker group attacked the website of the Public Debt Administration of Serbia leaving a message on the homepage with the number 8372, referring to the murder of Bosniak boys and men during the 1995 Srebrenica genocide carried out by Bosnian Serb forces.

